

## 5 Hunger and Everyday Life in the Ghetto

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The head bursts, where shall we get everything,  
Bread, potatoes, soup and salt.

– Yankele Hershkowitz, Łódź ghetto

The lack of food in the ghetto changed the way that many individuals lived their lives.<sup>1</sup> New social norms emerged. Diarists and chroniclers bewailed the transformation of societal norms as ghetto populations adapted to this new reality of living with hunger. Many saw these changes as moral failings. For some, stepping over starved corpses, repudiating beggars, and acting in ways that might be viewed as selfish were part of the new culture of surviving in a society without adequate food for everyone. Other behaviors that were bemoaned as the end of civility were in fact side effects of the physiological changes brought on by hunger: irritability, lethargy, and other negatively painted attributes. Still, others were products of desperation and survival: begging, stealing, and shamelessly searching for food. For the average ghetto dweller, the acquisition of food for themselves or their household became a central part of the daily rhythm of life. Faced with a food supply that was inadequate to sustain everyone in the ghetto, individuals and households employed various strategies for coping with hunger. In most cases, these strategies were multipronged and overlapping. They might include increasing the amount of food brought into the household or to the individual, utilizing social networks, and reducing the need for food.

It is important to look at coping methods employed by households because in the ghetto, family units were often given rations that had to be shared among all members. This led to difficult choices about how to divide food. Various factors played out in family units that influenced who received what amount of food, and uneven distribution was common within hunger-insecure families.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes sacrifice by family members meant that certain individuals had more food, a practice that was noble but could be dangerous, resulting in insufficient food for family members to survive. At other times, individuals were overcome by their hunger and ate more than their share of the household

food supply. An anthropologist studying a hunter-gatherer society that had been faced with extreme hunger noted that “social bonds based on kinship and marriage, cooperation, sharing, and reciprocity went by the wayside as individuals fought for their long survival against all competitors, including their own parents and children.”<sup>3</sup> The same happened in some families in the ghetto.

### **Assets into Food**

To cope with the inadequate food in their households, ghetto inmates employed various strategies for obtaining more food for the individual or family. Some methods included exchanging one’s assets – property or labor power – for food. Throughout famine literature, families trade their valuables for foodstuff. In the ghettos, this was an important means of acquiring food. Many households lost a great deal of wealth in the form of blocked bank accounts, seized or bombed property and businesses, or the looting of valuables from their homes during the pre-ghetto period, and some families lost income streams as well. Many began selling off possessions to safeguard against hunger even before the ghettos were created. For those with few possessions, either as a product of the Nazi invasion or due to their prewar economic status, there was often little that stood between them and food insecurity. Many families found themselves in a precarious situation.

Once in the ghettos, many families slowly sold off possessions to trade for food and other needs.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, some valuables were illegal for Jews to own, and a glut in the market meant that prices for valuables inside the ghettos were often artificially depressed, so some risked capture or even death to trade valuables outside of the ghettos. The Ringelblum Archive contains a document written by an anonymous author that tells the story of Mrs. C, a thirty-six-year-old corset maker whose business was seized by the Nazis and whose disabled husband could not work. She sold off the merchandise she was able to salvage from her shop before it was expropriated but eventually, after her movable goods ran out, had to turn to smuggling. Once capital punishment was instituted for smugglers, though, she decided she would not risk her life.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the price of smuggled-in food was so high that in order to gain something for one’s assets, a ghetto dweller needed to go outside the ghetto. Warsaw ghetto survivor Sara Frenkel risked her life smuggling milk into the ghetto for her sick father. She lied to him about leaving the ghetto because she did not want him to be upset about the risk she took on his behalf.<sup>6</sup> In the Kraków ghetto, many would leave their valuables with a trusted friend on the Aryan side who sold off the items at a better

price than could be obtained in the ghetto. With the proceeds, the family would buy food and other necessities.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, however, many families ended up with few possessions and few options – particularly when misfortune struck. Food-insecure households also needed medicines and other resources besides food and, when selling the last of the family's possessions, were often faced with difficult decisions. Łódź ghetto chronicler Josef Zerkowicz recorded the story of a family where the husband had a heart attack shortly after the son had died of starvation. His wife sold her wedding ring to buy medications to save him. With the remaining money, she was then faced with the decision of whether to buy more medicine for her husband, lunch for herself, or food for either her thirteen-year-old daughter or her husband.<sup>8</sup> Forfeiting one's own food in the ghetto to save a sick family member might lead to falling ill and possibly dying. Sickness was a real issue for vulnerable households. When a family member fell sick in a food-insecure home, they were likely doomed to die: there was simply not enough food for the sick person to recover. Family members could give up part of their meager rations, but that would make them, too, susceptible to illness, while not necessarily making a difference for the sick individual's chance of survival. This was a tragic situation for families in the ghetto. Survivor Dorka Borenstein remembered that the doctor warned her mother against family members' giving her tubercular brother extra food from their own rations, cautioning that although she might want to save the child, "at the same time you are depriving your other children of their meager share, and they will certainly die."<sup>9</sup>

In his July 27, 1942, sketch, "Dying in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto," Oskar Singer recorded the trials of a woman who forfeited her food in an effort to save her husband, Mordechai, from death by starvation. As Mordechai's body swelled from hunger, he tried to lie to his wife about the cause, but she knew the real reason. She skimmed her own food to add a little weight to his. As Mordechai began to recover, his wife deteriorated, and he realized what was happening. He confronted her, and she denied it. Eventually, he got sick again, and his wife spent their meager funds to purchase yeast for him. Singer notes that the money spent on the yeast was money not spent on food. Ultimately Mordechai died anyway.<sup>10</sup> In these instances, when there was insufficient food entering a household to save the life of a family member, the redistributed resources meant even less available food to sustain everyone, and might not even save the person who received more than their share. Despite that reality and the hardship of sacrificing, Łódź ghetto chronicler Oskar Rosenfeld recorded in his diary that "at home mothers save small bites for their sons, sisters for sisters, indeed for distant relations ... the husband has

hunger cramps, makes his wife believe he is full, and vice versa.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, not all stories were of sacrificing family members. Zelkowitz wrote of two women who accused their father of denying their dying mother food and medical attention. When they bought food for their mother, the father ate it himself.<sup>12</sup>

To purchase additional food and medications, families in the ghetto sold their last possessions – blankets, beds, and other basic necessities that shielded family members from greater susceptibility to illness due to cold or other causes. Aliza Pionka told the tragic story of two sisters in the ghetto. When one fell ill, the other worked a double shift so her sister could continue to remain on the work register and receive her supplemental soup. However, when a very cold winter came, the furniture was slowly consumed for heating the apartment until the two sisters – the healthy and the ill – shared a bed. The second sister, who had been working a double shift, also fell ill, and eventually, both sisters died in the ghetto.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, a family with sufficient resources could protect a family member from some of the dangers of sickness. During an epidemic in the Kraków ghetto, Norbert Schlang became sick with typhoid. Those who were found sick were being forced into quarantine. To protect his son and family from this situation, Norbert’s father, Dawid Schlang, used his position in the Kraków Judenrat to obtain ration coupons to bribe ghetto doctors not to report Norbert’s condition.<sup>14</sup>

Work was another means by which families and households increased food entitlement. Sometimes individuals sought work that compensated well or that provided additional food rations or meals as part of the job. Often, seeking better compensated work meant utilizing social networks to obtain a licit position in the ghetto, but it might also mean undertaking illicit activities such as smuggling or black-market food manufacture. This illicit work often required reliance on social networks as well – sometimes both inside and outside the ghetto. Both licit and illicit work that paid well might not, however, protect one from deportation. In the ghettos, individuals and households often had to struggle with the balance between safety and food security.

Often, utilization of labor power meant that everyone who was able to work did so, including the children and elderly. Sometimes individuals sought additional work to support themselves or family members. Leon Fruchtman had a job in a warehouse in the Kraków ghetto shoveling potatoes. Through this work, he was able to get additional potatoes that his family desperately needed because their work making brooms did not supply enough money to buy bread.<sup>15</sup> Bluma Rosen applied to work overtime as a shirt maker to qualify for an extra portion of soup so she could pass it on to her father. Yet she records the intense guilt she

felt when she fed her father in front of her sister's hungry children. She acknowledged that a choice had to be made. She could not divide the soup six ways and satiate everyone's hunger.<sup>16</sup>

Other types of labor power that were exchanged for food included survival sex, which often combined labor power with the utilization of social networks. Survival sex could range from direct prostitution to relationships formed for protection from hunger. Sometimes there was a progression from one type of survival sex to another. The Ringelblum Archive preserves the anonymously recorded story of a Mrs. G. who became a waitress and eventually fell into prostitution to support her family. Another story preserved by the same archive is of another Mrs. G., who took on a German lover to help provide for her family.<sup>17</sup> It was not only in Warsaw that people entered into romantic relationships or sexual barter relationships to improve their food situation. Gusta R., writing about her hunger in the Kraków ghetto, noted that relationships could protect a person from hunger and said that if a woman did not want to be hungry, she needed a boyfriend who worked in a kitchen. But she did not have one.<sup>18</sup> William Schiff was such a person in the Kraków ghetto: he provided for his girlfriend's family in addition to his own.<sup>19</sup> Halina Nelken complained in her diary of the "common, plain girls whom no one would have even looked at before," whose material circumstances in the ghetto made them attractive romantic partners. She blamed one of them for ensnaring her brother.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes when individuals could not obtain more food through work or the sale of valuables, they searched for food and expanded what they were willing to consume. Ghetto residents spent a great deal of time and energy searching for food. Kraków ghetto survivor Leon Leyson reported that in the ghetto, he "spent most of [his] time focused on the critical task of finding food."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Mark Goldfinger recalled widespread hunger, poverty, and squalor in the Kraków ghetto. A man could spend a whole day in search of some bread with "a small radish and some soft cheese."<sup>22</sup> A woman in the Łódź ghetto who had lost two children, "frantically ... wandered outdoors in search of sustenance for her remaining seven children, but her findings had been very miserable."<sup>23</sup> One mother who survived the war related, "I can tell you, I pulled my hair from my head, many, many, many times, on account of children they ask for bread and there was not [*sic*] to give them anything! What could a mother do! Just to kill yourself. This was all you could do, to kill yourself."<sup>24</sup>

For those whose resources had run out, the search for food extended to garbage cans and alleyways, and to items once considered inedible that were discarded by those who were still food secure. As more and more ghetto residents slid into poverty and food insecurity, these ways of

survival and consumption of hunger foods were soon adopted by the vast majority of the ghetto population. For many, new foods and new ways of eating within the ghetto required a radical adjustment but soon became part of ghetto life.

### Hunger Foods

The hunger of the ghetto population led them to eat a whole new range of foods. The consumption of “hunger foods” is not unusual in a famine situation.<sup>25</sup> Jenny Edkins in her work *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* notes that

it is not possible to read accounts of famines and the hardships and inhumanities to which people are driven during such periods without coming across accounts where things are eaten that under normal circumstances would in no sense count as food. During famines, people search the land for wild fruits, berries, etc., which serve as famine foods. If circumstances become more extreme, bark is stripped from the trees, grass is eaten, even the dirt is consumed.<sup>26</sup>

In the ghetto, a whole range of items found their way into people’s diet: potato peels, tops of vegetables, and even inedible things like plaster and sawdust. Pola Süssman, whose father was a baker in the Kraków ghetto, noted that some people mixed sawdust with the flour to stretch it.<sup>27</sup> This technique of using nonfood additives in bread was also done during the siege of Leningrad.<sup>28</sup>

During times of food shortage, people consume things that they would not normally consume based on their dietary customs.<sup>29</sup> Some definitions of food insecurity include not only people not having enough to eat but also people consuming things that they would not normally eat to survive. In the case of many Jews in the ghetto, a whole range of foods forbidden by kosher laws was consumed to preserve life. In addition to non-kosher foods, items that had previously been discarded became staples in the ghetto diet. Kraków ghetto survivor Amalia Bertgram recalled, “We lived in awful conditions and suffered from hunger. Children were dying one after the other. We didn’t dare to even dream of bread. We ate only stinking potato peels.”<sup>30</sup> In Łódź, potato peels became so coveted as to require a doctor’s prescription to obtain.<sup>31</sup> The peels had to be processed to make them edible, and various ghetto dwellers found imaginative ways to prepare this newly precious commodity. Bella Karp, a survivor of the Łódź ghetto, described eating patties made from ground-up potato peels, while Rosenfeld recounted in his Łódź ghetto diary the strenuous effort required to turn potato peels into dumplings, including washing them and running them through a meat grinder.<sup>32</sup>

The grinding of potato peels for use in ghetto cuisine was featured in Łódź ghetto fiction writer Isaiah Spiegel's story "Ghetto Kingdom":

A master chef has discovered that leftover potato peels washed and ground can be transformed, as if by sheer magic, into flat cutlets; this sticky, cloying delicacy is as sweet as a piece of fine cake, though the sand that hasn't been washed away by the water grates between the teeth. But who cares about that? The demon hunger renders the delicacy a savory meal to the sick and swollen, magically converting it into the wheat bread they have been dreaming of.<sup>33</sup>

Other items that were previously thrown away, such as radish and carrot greens, and the outer leaves of cabbages, soon found their way into the diets of ghetto dwellers. Warsaw ghetto survivor Lusia Haberfeld noted, "we made spinach out of you know, the leaves of the beetroots."<sup>34</sup> A Łódź ghetto welfare worker making an inspection a few months after the closing of the ghetto learned of the new eating habits that had developed among the food insecure and that had become commonplace in all ghetto households. Her discovery was made when she inquired after the bad smell and trash in an apartment. She was told that for the poor of the ghetto who could not afford cabbages, radishes, kohlrabi, or beets, the rotting "leaves of cabbage, of radishes, of kohlrabi or beets" served, despite the bad smell, as food.<sup>35</sup>

All of the ghettos contended with shipments of poor-quality food. Sometimes potatoes or other items froze. This problem was so common that the *Gazeta Żydowska*, a Jewish newspaper that circulated in the Polish Jewish ghettos, had an article in January 1942 on how to prepare items that had been frozen, such as potatoes, onions, and other sundries.<sup>36</sup> It was discovered that although frozen potatoes smelled bad when thawed, they could be redeemed by being made into a cutlet.

When food was particularly scarce, even these hunger foods commanded high prices on the ghetto black market. One anonymous Łódź ghetto diarist recorded, "There is a lot of cabbage on the Rynek Balucki, but it has gone bad. People started to fight for those rotten leaves as if they were some kind of treasure."<sup>37</sup> Łódź ghetto diarist Jakub Poznanski records paying nearly half a day's salary for ten decagrams of rotten radishes in December 1942.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes even foods that cannot be digested by humans are consumed during food shortages. Many depictions of famines reference people eating grass to fill their stomachs. Łódź ghetto survivor Flora Herzberger related how children gathered grass that was then cleaned and eaten with vinegar.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the human digestive system cannot break down grass to extract any nutritional value. The only benefit of eating grass was to combat the feeling of having an empty stomach.

Numerous techniques were utilized to stretch food in the ghetto. Some techniques were likely already known to Jews who had survived shortages during World War I or who had experienced periods of food insecurity due to poverty. Others might have learned of such techniques during the pre-ghetto period, when some were already experiencing food shortages. One means of stretching food was making soup. The mother of Kraków ghetto survivor Leyson made “a variety of soups, all with water as the main ingredient.”<sup>40</sup> One Warsaw ghetto survivor recalled that her mother invited hungry neighbors over to their home and, to accommodate the need to feed more people, added more water to the soup.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes soup in the ghetto was made with sparse ingredients. Historian and Łódź ghetto survivor Marian Turski recalled “so-called bread soup composed of water, a slice of bread, and a morsel of turnip.”<sup>42</sup> Erna Fridman, a child in the Kraków ghetto, made potato soup in the ghetto.<sup>43</sup> Since many parents were required to work, young children were sometimes the home cooks in ghetto households.

Another food item that was popular for stretching food was stew. Many Jews before the war enjoyed stews, particularly cholent, also known as Sabbath stew. Kraków ghetto survivor Bernard Offen recalled that before the war, his family brought a cholent to the bakery so that it could be baked during the Sabbath without the family kindling a fire and thereby desecrating the Sabbath. This prewar practice of making cholent continued into the ghetto period, with many people making cholent, including many vegetarian versions of the stew. Offen recalled that his family used the community bakery for this purpose even in the ghetto, but that they did not always have the means to do so.<sup>44</sup> Ringelblum commented that “stew has become very popular in the Ghetto, even a proletarian cholent. Tens of thousands of them prepared.”<sup>45</sup> Among the papers in the Ringelblum Archive is a flyer published in multiple languages that included among the various ways to cook rutabaga a vegetarian cholent recipe using rutabaga in lieu of potatoes.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to new food ingredients and food-stretching techniques, new ways of cooking appeared as well. Shortages of flour, meat, and even potatoes forced women to create ways of stretching their food. Sometimes it was traditional recipes with a little less of the premier ingredients. Nelken, writing in the Kraków ghetto, noted the cake her mother made for her brother’s twenty-first birthday: “Mama baked a cheesecake out of potatoes and a bit of cottage cheese.”<sup>47</sup> *Sernik*, a Polish cheesecake, usually called for potatoes. But sometimes new ingredients were featured, such as ersatz coffee, made from grains, which became a popular substitute for flour in making cakes. A cake recipe from the Łódź ghetto calls for three potatoes, twelve to fifteen spoons of (ersatz) coffee,



two spoons of flour, ten saccharine tablets, one spoon of drinking soda, and a little salt.<sup>48</sup> The *Encyclopedia of the Łódź Ghetto* contained an entry for “babka” (cake). It stated:

A cake made in the ghetto from grated potatoes, a small amount of flour (alternatively with grated radish, turnips, etc.), ersatz (substitute) coffee, and sweetened with saccharin (and flavored with various additives), cooked in a double boiler for one hour or longer (à la pudding). When potatoes were in abundant supply, it was a favorite substitute for bread. At the time of famine, babka was made from potato peels or ersatz coffee.<sup>49</sup>

A cake could be made with even fewer ingredients by adding vegetable leaves. Beet leaves, cooked and ground up, could be added to the above recipe, and a cake could be made using one less potato. This recipe had an advantage, as noted by the survivor who recorded it: the water used to cook the beet leaves could be saved and used to make soup.<sup>50</sup> Beet leaves could also be salted and fried and thus turned into “herring.”<sup>51</sup>

Ersatz coffee could also be used to stretch traditional dishes when ingredients were missing. For example, potato latkes, a traditional Eastern European Jewish dish normally made of flour, potatoes, and egg, were made by adding twelve to fifteen spoons of ersatz coffee to three potatoes and a little flour; less flour and less potato were needed for this coffee pancake than for the traditional potato pancake.<sup>52</sup> Sometimes ersatz coffee was used to make new foods. In the Łódź ghetto, there was a cookie known as a “Lofix” (black briquettes used as kindling), which was made using “0.25 kg of ersatz coffee mixed with a tablespoon of flour and a bit of water, then fried in a pan.”<sup>53</sup> Ghetto homemakers were required to be extremely creative in stretching the food products they were given. They contrived ways of making soup out of radishes and stretching small meat allotments by mixing in vegetables.<sup>54</sup>

The meat allotment was typically pork and horse, two foods that are not permitted to be consumed according to Jewish law. Some Jews, if they were able, refused to eat the nonkosher meat, preferring to sell it for more vegetables or other types of protein. Those with means were able to acquire kosher meat, at least in the early period of the ghetto, usually at very high cost. The Nazis frowned on Jewish religious life, including Jewish ritual slaughter (Shechitah). As a result, kosher butchers operated in secret, slaughtering live animals smuggled into the ghetto, or smuggling themselves out of the ghetto to slaughter meat and then smuggle the meat back into the ghetto. However, toward the end of the ghetto period, Shimon Huberband, a Warsaw ghetto Oyneg Shabes writer, recorded that “there is no ritual slaughter of animals. No chickens and virtually no meat or milk among Jews in the ghetto.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the ghetto conditions and scarcity of food, a large segment of the Jewish population remained concerned with adhering to the laws of kashrut. Only Warsaw and Łódź had official rabbinical boards functioning as part of the Judenräte.<sup>56</sup> In both cases, major deportations in 1942 wiped out many of the rabbis. Nevertheless, in the early part of the ghettos' existence, there was official word on matters related to Jewish food consumption and attempts by the community to provide some ritual food on a symbolic basis. For example, multiple ghettos made their own matzah, while others imported it. In 1940 and 1941, the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) provided 500,000 kilograms of matzah, which was distributed to 344 communities.<sup>57</sup> Kraków distributed matzah to Jewish residents via ration coupon.<sup>58</sup> The official rabbinate also issued dietary dispensations for Jews in the ghetto, including allowing horsemeat for the sick and pregnant and relaxing restrictions on Passover dietary rules.<sup>59</sup> In addition to taking guidance from official rabbis, religious individuals also continued to consult their personal rabbis if they were in the ghetto.

Numerous religious questions related to hunger arose. One such question, in the Warsaw ghetto, was whether it was permissible to hold a Passover seder when one did not have the proper food items for the ritual, such as wine or matzah. There were also many questions related to what the sick were permitted in terms of food. Could they eat on the Jewish fast day of Yom Kippur or eat nonkosher meat? Could those who were hungry break the Sabbath to purchase food?<sup>60</sup> In Łódź, an official rabbinical order was issued to permit the consumption of nonkosher meat by pregnant women and the sick.<sup>61</sup> These rabbinical leniencies were of little comfort to religious Jews who had lived their lives in adherence to a specific code of food consumption. Historian Robert Moses Shapiro cites a religious Jew, Oppenheim, who reported in the diary he kept on the margins of a prayer book that he had, for the first time, eaten food that was not kosher for Passover during the holiday.<sup>62</sup> Some religious parents also faced the anguish of their Jewish children eating nonkosher food to avoid starving. Zerkowicz tells the story of a religious man who was devastated because his children were eating nonkosher food in the ghetto.<sup>63</sup> Moshe Taube tried to keep kosher in the Kraków ghetto. To accomplish this, he and others keeping kosher brought food with them to work so as to avoid eating the midday stew of horsemeat.<sup>64</sup> For other religious Jews, the obligation to preserve their life, even if it meant eating nonkosher items, overrode strictures about religious dietary laws.

For the majority of the ghetto populations, however, consumption of nonkosher food became part of the ghetto diet. Henryk Łagodzki was a Christian who smuggled food into the Warsaw ghetto. He noted that

“I was asked to bring the pork fat, which Jews didn’t used to eat. But that was the time when they started to eat everything—both the meat and the pork fat. So I used to bring it for free from time to time.”<sup>65</sup> Horsemeat also became a widely consumed item that Jewish homemakers developed recipes for. One recipe called for making five large cutlets from 200 grams of horsemeat, which required grinding the meat, adding two shredded potatoes and some rye and flour, and seasoning with salt and pepper. The cutlets were then fried in a little oil.<sup>66</sup> Some ghetto residents mixed horse blood with salt and pepper and spread it on bread. Neither horse nor blood of an animal was kosher to consume, but the lack of foods meant that these items became delicacies. Sometimes eating blood was recommended for health reasons. One doctor in the Warsaw ghetto fed his patients cow blood mixed with onions and fat as a means of combating hunger edema. Unfortunately, it was not successful as a cure.<sup>67</sup> Another popular preparation was horsemeat meatballs. A ghetto song recounted that the horsemeat meatballs were generally made from poor-quality meat, the taste of which had to be masked by drinking saccharine-sweetened tea.<sup>68</sup> These horsemeat meatballs were another new food item for the ghetto Jews who had prior to the war been largely kosher observant. The changed diet created new phrases in the language, as Shapiro points out: “If a Jew in the Łódź ghetto saw someone running he might comment that ‘Er est vishtshinove ferd’ [he eats racehorses].”<sup>69</sup> It was not only in Łódź that jokes were made about horsemeat. As one Warsaw ghetto survivor recalled, “We couldn’t get any other meat except horsemeat, and that not very often. And we started buying horsemeat and eating horsemeat. And my father always used to joke, he used to walk in the middle of the pretending he is a horse.”<sup>70</sup>

Another nonkosher food item made an appearance in the ghetto diet: canned shellfish. It was initially a supplemental item but later became a standard ration. According to the ghetto encyclopedia, “Met at first with distaste, over time it grew more popular as a pleasant supplement to the ghetto diet.”<sup>71</sup>

Not just cooking but serving food became important in households with food insecurity. Kraków ghetto survivor Rosa Taubman remembered her father thinly and carefully slicing bread so that each portion was equal. She also described her family struggling with willpower, as some ate their portions all at once and others set a small portion aside for the evening.<sup>72</sup> Oskar Rosenfeld recorded the painful process of rationing, writing, “Those who are particularly prudent divide the loaf of bread into seven parts, one part a day. This part is then again divided into day portions. Woe to him who eats more.... Those who consume more than their ration of bread get hungry soon.”<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes hunger led people to skip past serving food so as to consume it directly. An anonymous ghetto inhabitant, writing in her Łódź ghetto diary on February 24, 1942, recorded, “Starvation is terrifying. People die like poisoned flies. Today I got one kilogram of parsley. My father, brother and I ate it raw.”<sup>74</sup> Łódź ghetto survivor Alfred Dube described eating ersatz coffee dry with a spoon to try to quench his hunger.<sup>75</sup> Other desperate measures were taken by those who ate and even searched for food that fell to the ground. Rosenfeld described a disabled child who threw himself to the ground to lick spilled soup from the dirty snow next to a latrine.<sup>76</sup> The *Chronicle* writers in the Łódź ghetto related a story of a man who threw himself down and lapped up soup that had spilled out on a dirty staircase.<sup>77</sup> An anonymous writer whose description was preserved in the Warsaw ghetto OyNEG Shabes Archive related such a scene of desperation:

An emaciated boy walks along Grzybowska Street. He bends down, wipes up some of the mud with his hand and puts it in his mouth. A bit of boiled ersatz coffee made from grain was mixed in with the mud. He walks on, picks up something from the ground and puts it, too, in his mouth. He does not shout, does not beg, he walks on. With his head bent down, he looks for whatever the ground will allot to him.<sup>78</sup>

This desperate searching for food by the persistently hungry in the ghetto is repeated in many ghetto diaries. Łódź ghetto writer Zelkowitz related that there were

hundreds, no, thousands of people like these ... staggering about in the ghetto. But, they do not strike. They are continually struck by the snakes that reside among them, who drive them into the streets, courtyards, and garbage dumps, where they burrow and search – For the shards of an earthen pot that can be licked. For a worn rag that, back in the good days, people used as a food wrapper and now can be sucked.... For leftovers of potatoes, beets, carrots, turnips, and so on. These people stagger about, their sizzling eyes scouting the territory, spending their last day in the garbage dumps, immersed to their necks.<sup>79</sup>

Sometimes access to the garbage of the privileged gave those who were starving an advantage in obtaining food scraps. A Warsaw ghetto writer for the OyNEG Shabes Archive recorded the sad story of a Mrs. D. who was unable to find work in the ghetto except as a cleaning person for families who could still afford such luxuries. She was fed while she was working if she could find a full-day cleaning job, but many days it was just a few hours at each place and she did not earn enough in a day to even buy bread or a meal at a soup kitchen. The author of the vignette noted,

Mrs. D. always washes the dishes first. Before she sinks them in a bowl with hot water she closely examines each plate, mug, and pot, hoping to find a sediment of thick soup or meat sauce or an uneaten carrot, parsley or potato....

From all her cleaning duties, Mrs. D. likes taking down the trash best. It is like a real quest for the Golden Fleece. Many a time she found in it something to fill her empty stomach ... edible leftovers: pieces of cooked beetroot, carrot, chives. Whenever she finds a bone she sinks her teeth in it and sucks at it passionately.<sup>80</sup>

The desperation of hunger led to the consumption of food that posed a danger to health. In his testimony at the Eichmann trial, Henryk Ross stated that potatoes arrived in the ghetto in good condition but frozen. When they thawed, it could be seen that they were not fit to eat. These potatoes were then doused in chlorine and buried. Children dug up the potatoes to eat them anyway.<sup>81</sup> When oil could not be found, machine oil was used for cooking.<sup>82</sup> One Warsaw ghetto survivor recalled, "I remember a situation that the smugglers, after they probably finished their business, they ate and drank and got sick in front of this tavern, and they would vomit. And within a few minutes, the beggars, the little children, ran to it and ate it up. They clean up the street."<sup>83</sup> The reasons for the consumption of these dangerous food (or nonfood) items was best articulated by Lucille Eichengreen, who wrote of herself and her family after one year in the ghetto, "We no longer cared what we ate."<sup>84</sup>

In another incident recorded in the Warsaw ghetto, a woman committed suicide by jumping from the fifth floor of a building:

she landed on a large cooking pot in which fish were being prepared. The pot collapsed and she lay dead, her head badly smashed. Pieces of brain lay mixed with the bloody fish. "Suddenly, small children crawled out of every nook and cranny: they headed for the scene like crawling ants. They grabbed the pieces of fish covered with brain and blood and shoved them into their mouths."<sup>85</sup>

The most extreme instances of hunger taboo consumption were the several cases of women who cannibalized their children in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>86</sup> The documented cases were December 15, 1941, at 53 Sliska Street; on an unnamed date at 30 Solna Street; and on February 19, 1942, at 18 Krochmalna Street, apartment 20.<sup>87</sup> Adam Czerniaków, the leader of the Warsaw ghetto, recounted in his diary the second case:

I proceeded to No. 18 Krochmalna Street, apt. 20, where I found, lying on a bunk, the 30-year-old Urman, Rywka, who stated in the presence of the witnesses, Mrs. Zajdman, Niuta, the secretary of the House Committee, and Murawa, Jankiel, that she was guilty of cannibalism, involving her own 12-year-old son, Berk Urman, who had died the previous day, by cutting out a piece of his buttock.<sup>88</sup>

The Warsaw leader concluded that the woman had lost her mind, and her cannibalism was viewed as the action of a person who was not mentally sound. To be sure, no cases of cannibalism were documented in the

Łódź ghetto or the Kraków ghetto. But cannibalism was not unknown at other points during the war among people who were quite desperately hungry, and there were multiple cases in all three ghettos where people hid dead bodies to continue receiving those individuals' rations.

### Household Strategies

Many households dealt with hunger through some combination of selling possessions, maximizing employment and employment potential, expanding the types of food eaten by the household, and adopting other methods. However, other households had only one means of dealing with hunger: reducing the need for food in the household. This might take place in a number of ways. One was rationing food within the household, which might include reducing the number of meals eaten or simply very slowly doling out what little was available in the home. Sometimes this strategy could backfire, causing a member of the household, overcome with hunger, to consume more than their ration. An anonymous girl wrote in her Łódź ghetto diary entry of March 11, 1942, that she ate all the honey. She was traumatized by her own hunger and its effect on her family. Of her actions she wrote, "I am selfish. What will the family say? I'm not worthy of my mother, who works so hard.... I have no heart, I have no pity. I eat anything that lands near me."<sup>89</sup> In the Warsaw ghetto a man was so driven by hunger that he stole a roll his wife had hidden under her pillow. He died still clutching the roll.<sup>90</sup> In the Łódź ghetto, "an 8 year old boy filed a police report against his own parents, whom he charged with not giving him the bread ration due him. The boy demanded that an investigation be conducted and the guilty parties be punished."<sup>91</sup>

Another means for reducing the need for food was breaking up the household. This took many forms, including having family members move into other households that were better able to support them, having individual adults or teens leave the home, or abandoning one's children. Leaving children in orphanages or abandoning them even when the parents were still alive was a survival strategy in many places during the Great Depression. Families who were unable to properly feed a child gave that child over to family members or an institution. This practice also occurred in the ghettos, all of which had institutions for children who were abandoned. However, the ghetto orphanages and shelters for abandoned children were unable to provide sufficient sustenance to save children from death. In fact, many children arrived at the shelter in such poor condition that they did not recover. One such child shelter in the

Warsaw ghetto, the Main Shelter Home (Główny Dom Schronienia), was located first at 127 Leszno and later at 39 Dzielna Street. The conditions of the institution were such that orphanage director Janusz Korczak requested to take over its running in February 1942.<sup>92</sup> A report on the shelter preserved in the Ringelblum Archive records, “Unfortunately, just like in other institutions, staying in the shelters saves the children neither from hunger nor death by starvation.”<sup>93</sup> The report noted that children were left at the shelter at high rates when food prices went up and that a large number of the children were deposited by poor refugees living in shelters. Conditions were so bad that in May 1941, a period when the overall ghetto suffered from high food shortages, 60 percent of all children who died in the ghetto were living at the Main Shelter Home. Sometimes parents abandoned their children at the refugee centers when they first arrived in the ghetto. Mordechaj Wasser, an employee at one of the refugee centers in Warsaw, recorded the story of a widower named Aszkenajzer who abandoned his children but returned to them after several days.<sup>94</sup>

Migration is a common tactic among famine victims to find other sources of food. The nature of the ghettos was such that Jews were trapped inside their walls, but if one still had means, they could escape the ghetto and live on the other side in hopes of finding food (albeit while facing the dangers of blackmail, reimprisonment, and even death). For those without any means or social networks on the other side of the wall, escape was quite difficult. For those with no means, sometimes deportation to forced labor was an option for sustenance or at least for the survival of the rest of the household. Hunger certainly drove some to deportation trains. Later, this would be deportation to their deaths.

## Conclusion

Hunger in the ghettos pervaded the daily experience of those suffering from it. It affected individuals, families, and the community at large. This everyday experience of hunger and social breakdown was a key component of the *atrocities of hunger*. Hunger drove individuals to behave in ways that challenged their core beliefs in terms of how they behaved, what they were willing to eat, and how they interacted with one another.

Famine studies provide a blueprint for how individuals and households typically cope with hunger. Individuals and households employed a variety of means to cope with hunger, much as has been done in other famine situations including engaging in various tactics of distribution and rationing of the food that was available. To increase the amount of food, individuals and families engaged in the sale of assets, labor strategies,

stretching of food through employment of hunger foods, and even theft. Many of the practices of the starving in the ghettos – such as searching through the garbage dump for food – payments were also present in the United States during times of great financial stress such as the Great Depression.<sup>95</sup> It was also common during other famines.

In some cases, the coping methods involved reducing household size by sending loved ones to orphanages and other support systems in the ghetto. Although limited, where possible, some engaged in migration. This last option which is exercised a great deal in normal famines was not available to most in the ghettos. It is the absence of the option for migration that created the most deadly conditions within ghettos.