

From the Diary of Josef Zelkowicz on the Hardships for Children in the Lodz Ghetto

The Lodz ghetto was officially sealed on May 1, 1940. The brutal impoverishment of the ghetto inhabitants began that summer. Very few people were working, and most Jews no longer had a source of livelihood. Although the effects of starvation were being felt, people nonetheless had the strength to protest and demonstrate. In August and September 1940, demonstrations erupted against Rumkowski and his policies. The demonstrators demanded jobs and a more equitable distribution of food. To placate the angry ghetto residents, Rumkowski reorganized the welfare system. On September 20, 1940, he issued Notice 123, proclaiming monthly support for a hundred thousand ghetto inhabitants. That month, the German authorities approved a loan of three million Reichsmarks for the ghetto, making it possible to activate the support system. Many ghetto inmates applied for relief, including some who were not indigent. To stanch the corruption, Rumkowski sent inspectors to visit the applicants' homes. Among these inspectors were Ryva Bramson and the author Joseph Zelkowicz. The vignette that follows conveys Zelkowicz's impressions of what he observed in his visits to the ghetto dwellings.

...Some children, however, have caught on. And that is because ten-year olds in the ghetto are already adults. They know and understand the fate that awaits them. They may not know, for now, why they are being torn from their parents; this may not have been explained to them. For now, it suffices to know that they are being separated from their trusted guardians, their devoted mothers and fathers. Such children are difficult to carry in one's arms and lead by the hand. They already rove alone in the street. They already cry with their own tears, and these tears are so bitter and stinging that they pierce the heart like poisoned arrows . . . The ghetto hearts, however, have ossified. They wish to break but cannot. This may be the cruelest curse of all. This may

be the harshest pain that a Jew can experience: the ghetto on the one hand, his own sensitive Jewish heart on the other.

It is even more agonizing and pointless for those who attempt to think logically. Very well, the thinking goes: the elderly are, well, elderly. If they've lived out their sixty-five years, they might, if others talk them into it, look at things roughly this way: "Thank God, I've lived out a fair portion of my life, in happiness or distress. There's nothing to be done about it; it's probably my fate. One can't live forever anyway, and what does it matter anymore – to die a few days, a few weeks, even a few years earlier than otherwise? Life has to end sometime." One might talk an old man into telling himself this. But the children, who have just poked through their eggshells, whose first glimpse of God's world was through the prism of the ghetto, for whom a cow or a chicken are creatures from a land of fantasy, who have never sensed the fragrance of a flower, the shape of an orange, or the flavor of an apple or pear – is their fate to die sealed? Must they experience the terror of death at this early juncture?

Fathers and mothers grind their teeth.

– We won't let them! We won't give them living children! They'll take our children dead...!

The ghetto skies are as immaculate as ever. The late summer sun shines as it always has. It casts its light and smiles at the Jews' anguish and pain – as if worms were being trampled on, as if a verdict has been handed down against fleas, as if the Day of Judgment of rats to be destroyed and obliterated has come.

Source: Josef Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem 2002, pp.265-267.