# THE GIRL IN THE DIARY

## SEARCHING FOR RYWKA FROM THE ŁÓDZ GHETTO

Extracts from the diary of Rywka Lipszyc
written in the Lodz Ghetto between
12 October 1943 and 12 April 1944

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 12 October 1943

Yesterday I was lost in my thoughts for a while. I was thinking that a 14-year old girl can be regarded as a child, if we take age into consideration. My friends are the best evidence. But to tell you the truth, the ghetto affects them (it affects me, too) and clearly it doesn't do us any good. Unfortunately, people only take age into consideration, and not brains. They consider me, a 14 year old, to be a child (I am lucky to be nicely developed physically), but they are wrong. I am going to waste.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 24 November 1943

I'm sick of my entire life … […] Oh, dear God, when is it going to end? I don't want to live at all. I have just thought, "What a pity that Jews are not allowed to kill themselves." It seems that you mustn't even think about it. I can't stand it anymore. I'm writing these words standing at the small table. That's why I'm scribbling so much. […] Oh, when will there be liberation? Because I really will go crazy...

### *Comment:* Michelle Greenberg, Rabbi

How can we even think to compare our own challenges with those of Rywka? We so easily say, "I'm starving" when we skipped our afternoon snack and feel the growl of our stomachs begging for dinner. Rywka truly starved. For the people of the Łódź ghetto, starvation was not merely a shortage of calories but a shortage of possibilities. When Rywka exclaims that she is "sick of [her] entire life," we must understand what she lacked. Rywka was penned in. For years she saw the same few blocks of buildings. She couldn't see trees, spend time outdoors in any significant way. She studied, but those studies were done in secret and limited to the few

resources available. Her family was disappearing from her. The varied components of living, the very things that give life meaning were taken away. Without the structures and supports – the ability to make plans, work to fulfill them, share stories and successes with friends and family – the life Rywka lived must have felt like a shadow.

At the center of Judaism lies the injunction: Live! While there are 613 commandments that Jews follow, nearly all can be waived to save a life. This ideal is *Pikuach Nefesh*, literally Saving a Life. But what value life has is not questioned in that charge. Should someone be allowed to end their life if they are in immense pain? If they are living in inexplicable terror? If they know that soon their life will be ended in a brutal manner? I expect these questions were asked often in the ghettos and forests and camps. For a traditional and observant young woman, the desperation that led to articulating a question of such weight and taboo must have terrified her. What do we take from this? What lesson do we learn in the midst of someone else's misfortune? Can we take the lesson of Rywka's immense will to live as a directive for us. In the midst of our pain, should we compare our suffering to that of this young woman? I think no. I think we can use her as a role model for finding a way even in the darkness.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 24 December 1943

Oh, to write!... To be able to write, to make pen move on paper! I need to write. Yesterday I was thinking about "emotion." How much does it express? At this moment I'm thinking about the passionate emotions. [...] I do feel affection for Surcia. Maybe not for her, but for her soul, which means for her, after all. Oh, Surcia. I take delight in the sound of her name. (It's good that we are of the same sex.) Otherwise, what would it look like, such writing? [...] She is the only one allowed to read my diary and I'm not embarrassed at all.

Oh, I love so few people... So, when I do love somebody, the affection is stronger than in other cases. She and my siblings... Oh, I wish I could have them all with me!!!

## *Comment:* Dr. Magdalena Budziszewska, psychologist

"Do you have a best friend, a true bosom friend?" my grandmother asked me when I was approximately the same age as Rywka Lipszyc. She must have known, that on the threshold of adulthood, having a friend can be one of the most important things, even one's entire world. During childhood, friendships often develop with intensity. This intensity can be so fervent that it often mirrors feelings comparable to love. Friendship is, after all, a form of love, and its strength in difficult conditions might be a prerequisite for survival. In her diary, the teenage Rywka expresses her powerful connection to Surcia. Rywka's fate gave her very little of the typical experiences children of her age usually have: growing up in their own loving families, regular school education, playing with peers. But she had a friend. Her emotional confession in the diary resembles a piece of normal life in an abnormal situation.

Surcia was, it seems, a wise friend. She encouraged Rywka to keep a diary – very useful advice. As numerous contemporary inquiries confirm, writing can help in coping with extreme situations and traumas. Throughout adolescence, self-expression is important in order to help one find one's own voice. Rywka, besides describing cold and hunger, finds space to care about her own writing, her own style. She writes poems and they are recited. It is good and positive, as it is impossible to live thinking exclusively about the war. From today's perspective the old-fashioned handwritten letters of young girls are very moving. They eagerly await these letters, which were passed along either directly or through intermediaries. Friends would miss each other and carry on conversations on paper. These conversations are extremely serious, discussing general things, attitudes, values, Zionism… Only sometimes did their everyday worries become part of this correspondence.

And there is the other side. For Rywka, Surcia's friendship is an emotional substitute for lost family, and recompense for difficult relations with her cousins and loneliness in her adoptive home. She does not use the word "loneliness" in her narrative, but it

is striking that aside from her schoolteachers, no important figures or role models are described in her diary. This situation intensifies the accumulated feelings for Surcia – her friend and her mentor. Among Rywka's loved ones, there are only absent people who died or were deported, with two exceptions – her younger sister and Surcia. She is perhaps the only person who is wholeheartedly needed by the serious, responsible Rywka, who grew up far too early (Rywka's peers are described in the diary as rather childish compared to the author). With Surcia she communicates her needs of contact, conversation, advice, intimacy.

All the emotions Rywka describes are simple, strong, and explicit, as if there was an exclamation point. Despite her young age, Rywka reflects on who and how she loves, rather than if she is being loved.

During a time of immense suffering, Rywka still manages to be preoccupied with the well-being of others. She demonstrates significant emotional maturity, visiting the sick and worrying about her sister going hungry. She considers her own behavior in the context of internalized moral values… Her idealism, emotionalism, precise and firm belief in principles, focus on "I" (natural for the form of diary) accompanied by altruism – these are all typical traits of adolescence. But Rywka, perhaps in contrast to the cruel circumstances she finds herself in, brings forward their best form. Love, feeling, ideals constitute her own source of strength.

The strength Rywka demonstrates throughout the beginning of her diary decreases significantly as the situation in the ghetto become increasingly dire. She battles the cold conditions, extreme hunger, and pure terror. Rywka becomes less idealistic and writes more about facts: fuel to fetch, hunger, discouragement, and fear for her loved ones.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 15 January 1944

… I'm full of remorse because Abramek and Tamarcia were deported. Oh, God! Bring them back to me, I can't stand it, my heart is going to break … […] Oh, go to hell you plunderers and murderers… I'll never forgive you, never. But in the face of "them" I'm helpless … What's more,

nowadays at home they talk about the dead... Today at 2 o'clock one neighbour died, she fainted and... that's it...

## *Comment:* Dr. Monika Polit, literary scholar

Rywka's younger siblings – Abram Ber, aged 10, and Tamara, aged 5 – were deported from the Łódź Ghetto in September 1942. They were both victims of an action known as "*Wielka Szpera*".

Before the deportations of September 1942, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Council of Elders in the ghetto, desperately tried to negotiate with the Germans in order to decrease the number of deportees. They eventually agreed to lower it from 24,000 to 20,000 people, on one condition… all children under the age of 10, sick, and elderly people were to be deported from the ghetto. In his speech of 4 September 1942, Rumkowski informed the crowd of ghetto residents about this decision:

"A grievous blow has struck the ghetto. They are asking us to give up the best we possess – the children and the elderly. I never imagined I would be forced to deliver this sacrifice to the altar with my own hands. In my old age, I must stretch out my hands and beg: Brothers and sisters: Hand them over to me! Fathers and mothers: Give me your children! . . .

I share your anguish and am afflicted by your pain; I do not know how I can stay alive after all of it. I must tell you a secret: they demanded twenty-four thousand victims, three thousand people within eight days, but I managed to reduce the number to twenty thousand and even less, but only on the condition that they be children up to age ten. Children older than ten are protected. Since the number of children along with the elderly comes to thirteen thousand, it will be necessary to make up the difference with the ill.

I find it difficult to speak; I haven't the strength. But I wish to express my request to you: help me carry out the Aktion! The thought that others will take the task into their hands, heaven forbid, makes me tremble and fills me with dread... A broken Jew is facing you. Do not envy me. This is the harshest decree ever imposed. I raise my broken, trembling hands to you and beg: give me the sacrifices in order to prevent

further sacrifices, in order to protect this community of a hundred thousand Jews. So they promised me: if you hand over the sacrifices by yourselves, it will be quiet."

As it turned out, the Germans did not keep this promise. They entered the ghetto and brutally decimated its population. They took the children and the elderly, and also young, healthy, working people.

Along with Abram and Tamara Lipszyc, 15,681 Jews were deported from the Łódź Ghetto to the Chełmno killing center.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 19 January 1944

At night, going to bed, I involuntarily reached for the pouch filled with photos... I looked at a few of them. Oh, God... when I saw Tamarcia's picture I suddenly realized that she was [now] six, going on seven years old. At her age I was going to school!... Oh, it would be so wonderful if all the children could go to school!... My eyes were filled with tears... Through the fog of my tears, I saw Tamarcia's frightened eyes (that's how she looked in the picture)… […] She looked like she was calling me. Like she was crying for help... I did nothing... I was in bed, I couldn't even cry... my heart was pounding and trying to break free... I did nothing... Oh, Tamarcia, where are you, I want to help you […]. All of a sudden I ask myself anxiously if I'll recognize Tamarcia. Years are passing by!...

Oh, God! How can I not think about it? How can I take it?... I looked into my mama's eyes (in the photo). Oh, God! How much they express […]. Oh, I'll never tell you this, mommy! You've left me forever! I feel horrible, I'm suffocating! God, let me take the place of my mother. Let me suffer for my siblings! Oh, God! It's so hard!... And I'm always alone!

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 26 January 1944

Yesterday I looked through the photographs again... but only of Abramek and Daddy... Daddy! He appeared in front of me as if he were alive. I heard a whisper... your Daddy is dead... your Daddy is dead... No, it is impossible... he is alive... he is alive. Another whisper... already a third year runs its course... No, it is impossible. I can see his eyes, his wise and expressive eyes and I suddenly remembered his handshake. I still feel it. It was when they let us into the hospital on Yom Kippur (on Łagiewnicka Street) and Daddy squeezed my hand while saying goodbye. Oh, how much that handshake meant to me, how much fatherly love it had. Oh, God, I will never forget it! My Daddy alive, my loving Daddy the dearest of all the dearest creatures in the world.

I mustn't have any illusions about my parents... they are no more, oh, these words hurt and stab me so much! Like hedgehog spikes. In front of my eyes I see images of my parents' deaths. I wasn't with my father when he was dying... when they called me, he was gone. My God! I wanted to throw myself on him, go with him, forget about everything. That was my initial reaction but later I couldn't. I had my Mom, my brother and sisters. I had to live... I had to... for them! But at that moment for the first time in my life I showed my emotions... I cried and while crying I spilled out my awful pain without realizing. Until then I had been keeping my feelings to myself... nobody knew anything about me, I didn't know much about myself... Only then... then I noticed that my Mom understood me. Mommy... I did feel it. At that moment we got closer and we were living not like mother and daughter, but like best friends... The age difference was unimportant (I was twelve then). Oh, God! And then Mom was dead and what she hadn't told me remained a secret forever. After her death I got closer to

my siblings (Abramek appointed me as mother. "You are our mother," he used to say). I wanted to fill in, but... it wasn't meant to be. I was left alone with Cypka …

## *Comment:* Dr. Monika Stępień, historian

On the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, the Association for the Protection of Jewish Health in Poland, which promoted medical education, hygiene, preventive medicine, public health and caring for children, was running more than 300 medical institutions in 50 towns and cities and employed more than 1,000 people. In addition to running its own facilities, the Association provided assistance to Jewish hospitals. They were established through the efforts of local Jewish communities and also supported by private benefactors.

Some of the Jewish healthcare institutions continued operations during the war. Despite the difficult conditions, they tried to give aid to the sick and the hungry. Hospitals and other healthcare sites mainly operated in the large ghettos, such as in Warsaw, Kraków, Wilno [today Vilnius, Lithuania] and Łódź.

In the Łódź Ghetto, the organization of healthcare was overseen by the Health Department, subordinate to the Eldest of the Jews. The Department ran seven hospitals, employing about 120 doctors. The total number of beds was approximately 2,600. In the ghetto, there were also several pharmacies and two ambulance stations with two (temporarily three) horse-drawn ambulances and several teams of emergency responders on foot.

The most important medical facility run by the Health Department, which also served as its headquarters, was Hospital No. 1 on 34/36 Łagiewnicka Street located in the pre-war building of the Healthcare Fund. Within it was the relocated Poznański Family Jewish Hospital. This was the hospital where Rywka's father Jakub (Jankiel) Lipszyc stayed.

The medical facilities operating in the Łódź Ghetto had limited opportunities to provide their patients with medical care – there was a lack of medicine, dressings, medical implements, as well as food and fuel. The catastrophic sanitary conditions in the ghetto contributed to repeated outbreaks of epidemics. Fighting against

them was made more difficult by the major overcrowding. The cramped, crowded and poorly heated apartments became incubators for terrible illnesses, which were exacerbated by hard labor, and starving people were particularly vulnerable. Doctors working in the Łódź Ghetto were faced with challenges beyond their meager capacities. Despite the daily efforts of the medical staff, mortality due to disease steadily increased. Arnold Mostowicz, one of the emergency doctors, noted in his memoirs: "In the second year of the ghetto's existence, the role of the doctor virtually ceased to have meaning, with one exception – the issuing of death certificates."

The patients in the ghetto's hospitals became one of the first victims of the "Wielka Szpera" deportations. Brutally dragged from their beds, beaten and forced into trucks, they were sent to the Chełmno death camp. The abandoned buildings became assembly points for subsequent groups slated for deportation. After the end of the "Szpera", the hospitals were converted into workshops.

At the end of 1942, the German authorities allowed for the opening of two new hospitals in the ghetto, but its residents were reluctant to make use of them, remembering the fate of the patients sent to the death camps during the "Szpera". Hospitals, which until then had been associated in the social consciousness with care, rescue and hope, began to be perceived as waiting rooms to hell. This reversal of meaning is symptomatic of the Holocaust, so much so that in 1989 the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., requested the original entrance doors to the hospital on Łagiewnicka Street from the City of Łódź in order to include it in their exhibition. The doors were sent to the Museum the next year and are on display as part of their collection.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 3 February 1944

Yesterday during the class Bala asked us to write how we imagined our arrival in Palestine, or rather in *Eretz* Israel.

Oh, Eretz Israel, the words are so meaningful, how much longing I have for this land!... [...] And so, instead of having a Yiddish class am I writing in my diary in Polish? Actually, this longing, this attraction has

diminished since the Szpera, but the longing for Abramek and Tamarcia has increased...

### *Comment:* Dr. Magdalena Budziszewska, psychologist

Hope. This is what Palestine, or *Eretz Israel*, meant.

I was fascinated by this teenage girl, so full of emotional insight. Writing about emotions, Rywka states that it is good to experience them all from time to time, all of them are important to acknowledge and their importance to be recognized. A statement that a psychologist can only agree with.

But we have to remember that this is the normal way of dealing with emotions. In the midst of crisis, hunger, illness, in the ghetto where the situation worsens day-by-day, it should be different. One has to keep an eye on one's feelings, strength, and endurance. There is no room for despair, mourning, or hopelessness.

This is why Rywka calls her current life an abnormal time. It is a time of war, and war is not normal; war is not the entire world. She has to learn a trade to earn her living, but she also has to write – for herself. She dreams to learn to prepare for life. She compares her current times to the normal, natural times to come and to the mythical time of liberation – as mythical as Palestine. Psychologists would say that she consciously brings a forward-looking perspective, an adaptive reaction to suffering. This could be the intention of the teacher who assigned her this task.

It is not without reason that this forward-thinking perspective is challenged by the past. The graves, the dead parents, the lost siblings are there. This dissonance creates a dilemma for Rywka, as her good future is always connected with the past – it is a world where she can always go and visit the graves, they are not too far away. It is Israel that is too far away.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 4 February 1944

For a few days something has been drawing me to the cemetery... [...] To Mommy, to Daddy. [...] My God! What's going to happen when we

are in Eretz Israel, we'll be so far from my parents [...] God! ... May this war end soon!

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 11 February 1944

... It's Friday again. Time goes by so fast. And for what? Do we know? What's waiting for us in the future? I'm asking this question with both fear and youthful curiosity. We have an answer to this, great answer: God and the Torah. Father God and Mother Torah! They are our parents! Omnipotent, Omniscient, Eternal!!! It's so powerful!!! In front of this I'm just little creature that can hardly be seen through the microscope. Oh, I'm laughing at the entire world – I, a poor Jewish girl from the ghetto – I, who don't know what will happen to me tomorrow ... I'm laughing at the entire world because I have a support, a great support: my Faith, because I believe! Thanks to it I'm stronger, richer and more worthy than others... God. I'm so grateful to you!!! ...

There was an inspection by a hygienist in the school. But don't be afraid my diary, I was and am clean.

### *Comment:* Michelle Greenberg, Rabbi

What a joy and wonder to be able to find comfort in the tradition. It is said that all is taught to us in the Torah should we just continue to ask questions. The rabbis teach that the Torah has 70 faces. I understand this to be that each time we look at the teachings, 70 different avenues open up to our curiosity. Each time! For Rywka to return to Torah again and again, she would always find something new. Just as we know our parents differently as we age and experience different people and events, so too, Rywka's relationship with the teachings of the Torah, grew for her with each of her changes. It is a book filled with family history, moral lessons,

perseverance, and resilience. It is the mechanism by which Jews speak to one another across the ages. For Rywka to find solace in Torah, she is able to bring the supports and structures of her former life, back to the fore. Using the metaphors of Father God and Mother Torah, she is no longer an orphan, rather she can be protected by the teachings of love, community, and tradition.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 13 February 1944

… I'm sitting at the school now and like all my friends I'm waiting for the soup. It is terribly cold – there is snow outside and the classroom hasn't been heated. I'm writing, or rather scribbling, my left hand is in a muff… I'm sleepy…

[…] I'm full of remorse … Maybe if Abramek had looked well they wouldn't have taken him. He was such a good kid. How many times, when I was short of bread, would he give me his? Oh, how many times? That's why he looked bad. I'm full of remorse...

### *Comment:* Dr. Edyta Gawron, historian

Today we pay a great deal of attention to good appearances. Before leaving, we stand in front of the mirror asking ourselves, "Do I look good?" We think, "Do I feel good about how I look, will other people appreciate how I look…?"

During the Holocaust, a "good appearance" was a matter of survival! It did not literally mean a pleasing appearance, a nice hairstyle or fashionable clothes. A "good appearance" stood in opposition to a "bad" one, i.e. a Semitic appearance, which during the war could be a death sentence.

A "bad appearance" was identified with characteristics such as dark hair, dark eyes, a specifically slightly curved nose, and sometimes a swarthy complexion. It could also include a slightly bent figure for men. During the war, this was accompanied by a restless, fearful gaze and a nervous manner, often coupled with

incorrect Polish, a distinctive Yiddish accent and a specific intonation commonly referred to as *żydłaczenie* [Jewish cadence]. In the case of men and boys, suspicions of Jewish origin based on Semitic looks as conceptualized by the Nazis and their collaborators could be confirmed by checking for signs of circumcision (the removal of the foreskin).

A "good appearance" was identified with looks considered to be "Aryan" – blond hair, blue eyes, light skin, straight posture and, for men, a more muscular figure. Consequently, some attempted to achieve a similar effect by, for example, dying their hair blond and taking care to maintain proper posture. A "good appearance" often went hand in hand with knowledge of the tenets of the Christian faith (during the Second World War, besides checking baptismal certificates, people were also tested on such things as knowledge of prayers, the ability to correctly make the Sign of the Cross, etc.) and of the local language (i.e. Polish, Slovak, Russian). A "good appearance" additionally lent credence to the removal of discriminatory marks: the yellow Star of David or, in the General Government, the armband with the Star of David. If possible, they tried to have signs of membership in Aryan organizations or wear clothing indicative of a social status from which Jews had been banned during the war years.

A "bad appearance" in certain conditions, e.g. in the ghettos, work camps or concentration camp, could indicate assumptions about one's state of health – a pale face, sunken cheeks, signs of weakness, emaciation and slow movements were all read as signs of incapacity and thus of being useless to the Third Reich. However, a "good appearance" in this situation could simply indicate a healthy appearance and physical fitness. Its determinants here were rosy cheeks, good posture and a smooth gait. In the case of children and teenagers the key element of a "good appearance" was one's height – the taller and healthier they looked, the older they appeared and thus could be considered as fit to work. In some camps inmates were separated by age (e.g. older than 14 or 16) or by height (one had to be significantly taller than the other children).

"If only Abramek had the right look…" wrote Rywka, who believed that this "bad appearance" caused by malnutrition and exhaustion had been the cause for her brother's deportation…

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 14 February 1944

Mr. Zemel came and delivered a speech, or rather he repeated what the Chairman had said before. And: those who are to be deported but are hiding are being aided by other people. This is forbidden... Apparently this is going to be some kind of easy labor. But who knows? What's more, during the working hours between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. nobody will be allowed to walk in the streets. The ghetto is turning into a Arbeits Lager. The apartments will have to be locked. Only the bedridden with medical certificates will be able to stay inside. Nobody else. Now I don't know what's going to happen to Saturdays... after all, an apartment can be locked with a padlock. What's going to happen with attendance at the workshops? God! What's going to happen? Only You know. I was so upset that I wrote a poem. I don't know what will happen to the assemblies. The provisions department and the other departments will be open from 5 p.m. so people will be able to get their food.

### *Comment:* Dr. Monika Polit, literary scholar

Even before the Second World War Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski was famous for his ardent speeches. When the ghetto was established in Łódź, he believed that regular speeches for ghetto inmates would enable him to better fulfill the obligations of administering the ghetto imposed upon him by the Germans.

Sometimes his speeches were noted simultaneously and then typed up by secretaries. Some were edited and prepared for printing and then published in the *Geto-Tsaytung* [Ghetto Newspaper].

He used to deliver his speeches at the "Firefighters' Square". During strikes and unrest in the ghetto, he was interrupted by whistling and insults. But he also spoke to selected and restrained audience in the ghetto's cultural center or in workshops and factories. Surviving witnesses recalled the emotion with which he expressed himself, his gesticulations, and expressive facial contortions.

Even in 1944, when it was clear that the ghetto would soon cease to exist, he continued to deliver speeches. One of them, from 13 February 1944, was addressed to managers of factories and workshops. He urged them to stop hindering his administration in fulfilling German orders to send away 1,500 men fit to work. As numerous men designated for deportation were hiding in their homes or workplaces, Rumkowski said:

"I warn the directors of factories and remark that I know, that people are hiding even in the workshops… I tell you, you are playing a dangerous game". [Ghetto Chronicle, vol. 4, p. 117]

Desperately trying to extend the existence of the ghetto, Rumkowski tried not only to fulfill German orders, but also anticipate their expectations. Fearing unexpected German audits that could question the need to keep so many people in the ghetto, in the same speech he presented new rules for work and movement in the ghetto area. According to the new regulations, workers and clerks were not allowed to leave their workplace between 7:00 am and 5:00 pm, and no one was allowed to move around on the streets without special permission/pass. As a result, the ghetto was supposed to look like a model "city of work", where every pair of Jewish hands was needed.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 17 February 1944

What's more in our school (not school any more, because its name was changed to *Fach Kurse*), we won't have any Hebrew classes or math, only five hours of productive sewing and one hour of technical drawing. Neither books nor notebooks are allowed at work. It's all secret, they (the workshops) must cover up for us, us—the children—because studying is forbidden. It hurts so much (For them we are not humans, just machines). Oh, pain! But I'm glad that I can "feel" that it hurts because as long as it hurts, I'm a human being. I can feel—otherwise it would be very bad. God! Thank You for your kindness towards us!

Thank You God!

Tomorrow we are having an inspection by a hygienist again, like every Friday …

## *Comment:* Dr. Monika Polit, literary scholar

When the Łódź ghetto was established, it initially had an extended, well-organized school system. Along with regular primary schools, there were special schools, religious schools and gymnasiums (including one Hebrew gymnasium), a trade school and – for a short time – the *Wszechnica Gettowa*, a tertiary-level academy for those who had graduated high school or had been in university before the war, specializing in mathematics, chemistry and psychology.

The curricula in primary schools and gymnasiums was initially based on the pre-war Polish curriculum, but they were banned in 1940. This decision coincided with a plan devised by Rumkowski, a devotee of Yiddish language and culture, to make Yiddish the official language of the educational and judiciary systems in the ghetto. The implementation of this plan proved to be a challenge, as the majority of pre-war teachers now working in the ghetto could barely speak Yiddish or did not know the language at all. As a result, in 1941 a seminar was established in order to prepare aspiring teachers to teach in Yiddish. The Commission for Yiddish Language and Literature Courses for Teachers was established soon after. One of its members, Shmul Rosenstein, created a two-volume calligraphic textbook for teaching Yiddish.

This educational system, into which so much effort and resources had been poured, was liquidated suddenly in late 1941 as the school buildings were taken over by Western European Jews who had been deported to the Łódź Ghetto.

Children and young people were then cared for by the *Komisja Przewarstwowień* [Regrouping Commission], which was tasked with preparing and adopting them to work. Young candidates were either sent directly to workshops and factories or trained in special workshops where they also had the chance, although it was greatly limited, to take basic classes in subjects such as math and Yiddish. These classes were formally banned in February 1944, but continued in secret before being officially reinstated in April 1944.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 20 February 1944

Yesterday, on Saturday, I had to be in the workshop…

Oh, God! I'll never forget this feeling, I felt so bad, I was suffocating, I felt like crying! Crying … crying … I watched people going to the workshops as usual. This day, this holy, sacred day is for them an ordinary and normal weekday. God, and I'm among them? And I'm like them? (Maybe nobody thought about it.) For me, going to the workshop on Saturday was a terrible agony. I thought involuntarily: if I have to do it again (I wish I wouldn't), will it become commonplace for me, will I get used to it? Oh, God, do something so I wouldn't have to go to the workshop on Saturday!

[…] In this respect our class is all right. There are many girls who don't work on Saturdays… but so what? What good is it for me?

Mrs. Kaufman showed us how to cover the gusset and the lapels. That's what I need! I kept whispering inwardly "Saturday, Saturday," in order not to forget. God forbid! One more thing: it was the Saturday of *men hot gebentsht rosh khoydesh* …

### *Comment:* Michelle Greenberg, Rabbi

The Holocaust began with the removal of minor liberties such as the right to ride a bicycle or own a radio. It continued through the removal of the Jewish people from the rest of the community by expelling Jewish children from schools and professionals from their places of work. Then physical liberty was removed as Jews were forced into ghettoes. Next were the losses of identity and belief. Rywka was once forced to work on Saturday, Shabbat, the day of rest. Shabbat is a day for family, for prayer, and for study. Shabbat is a time for rest and renewal. For a traditional Jew to work on Shabbat is a violation and betrayal of her beliefs. By

taking the holiest of days and making it as mundane as another day, the Nazis had taken another piece of Rywka's humanity.

It is through her devotion to faith that Rywka finds ways to survive the ghetto. It is the structures of the commandments and the rituals that provided her security and safety. In being forced to desecrate Shabbat through work, Rywka betrays another part of herself. This shame could have been debilitating – just another defilement by the Nazis. But for me, I see Rywka finding alternatives. Even when not able to observe Shabbat as a traditional Jew, she marks it. In her mind she thinks on what she would do could she have observed. She acknowledges the unique nature of this particular Shabbat having unique prayers for the Jewish month starting the following week. Rywka felt agony in having to work. It must have been painful to look around the workshop and assume those around her had no idea of the import of the day. How alienated she must have felt. But even in that darkness, she made a prayer of sorts, "Saturday, Saturday" she repeated again and again. Even when we can't observe as we would wish, or be among those whom we love, or be free, we too can pull a bit of the sacred into our minds. Rywka's prayer, "Shabbat, Shabbat" is a beacon. Though her liberties and rights were taken from her, she fought to maintain her identity. And she did.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 28 February 1944

Sewing something gives me a lot of pleasure and when I finish it I'll know that I'm stronger... […] I'll have a profession. I won't depend on my fate, but my fate will depend on me …

A few years ago, in my dreams, when I was imagining my future, I could see sometimes: an evening, a studio, a desk, there is a woman sitting at the desk (an older woman), she's writing... […] I can see myself as this woman. Another time I could see a modest apartment which I share with my sister—earlier I thought it was Tamarcia, but today it's more probable that it's Cypka. Some other time I can see: an evening, a modest

room with lights, all my family sitting at the table. It's so nice... so warm, cozy... Oh, it's so good! Later, when they all go to bed, I sit at the sewing machine and I'm sewing... sewing... it's so sweet, so good... so delightful! Because everything I make with my own hands is our livelihood.

[...] Once upon a time when I was five, maybe six, or maybe younger... it was in the evening. Mommy was sitting at the table and I — I [...] was saying stupid, childish things that hurt Mommy a lot.

[...] Oh, even today I'm full of remorse for those words, although I was a child who understood almost nothing.

[...] I remember a song: "Only a Mother's Heart." [...] I know what I had and what I lost. Oh, will I ever be a mother?

[...] Mother!? What does it mean? Who is this creature called mother, who with great pleasure suffers and gives birth to a new life...

[...] Mother! Will I be a mother one day? Will I be powerful?

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 15 March 1944

So, last night we agreed that three of us [...] would go to pick up some coal. We were to collect 100 kilograms. The entire ghetto has to do it by Saturday. I went alone, because on the way I wanted to visit Chajusia. At 9:40 p.m. I stood in line...

The line was very long! Very long! Accidentally I stood among several women, who were very talkative. [...] One was saying, "It looks like the line is shorter at 77:30 p.m. because people are having dinners." "Yes," confirmed the other one. "And at 99:30, after the meal, they leave their

houses and start hunting. Oh, we live like the primitive people, we come home after a day's work, eat our meals in a hurry and go hunting..." Something inside me sobbed and hurt. Yes, we're wild and primitive people and... we go hunting. Oh, it hurts so much! We, the people of the 20th century—we, who just a few years ago, had a relatively high standard of living, we are now compared to the primitive people! Oh, God! We lived and worked so that after a few years we could face such a comparison. Oh, it's so tragic.

Yes, I stood in line for a long time. The mud was horrible. I don't wear these leaking shoes any more but I wear the shoes that are very tight and I can't put on more than one pair of stockings. No wonder my feet were freezing and I was shivering. Brr. Finally... finally (I won't elaborate on that) I entered the coal yard. It was 11:30 p.m. I met Estusia, Minia and Cypka in front of a pile of coal (oh, they had to also bring Cypka).

We came home at 1.00. I had a little adventure in the street. In the Old Square, a sack (20 kilograms) fell off my back (I couldn't pick up more). There was a hole in it and pieces of coal were scattered all over. I was walking alone and without any help, so I wanted to wait for Estusia. Estusia did not arrive. What to do? I had no other choice but to take out a needle, a piece of thread and stitch it. But I couldn't lift the sack up again. As if out of spite, nobody was coming. A sled would have come in handy for me. I had been waiting for Estusia too long, so I decided to pull the sack. I walked a little bit and... stop I was halted by a large puddle. I wanted to lift the sack up (I didn't succeed), when I suddenly heard Estusia calling me. She had been looking for me everywhere, she didn't know where I was. She went home and brought a sled. We went to bed at 1:30 a.m.

Now I'm not feeling well. But enough of that. I have to collect 40 kilograms more.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 17 March 1944

Yesterday I wrote a poem in Yiddish for the school performance but probably it'll be recited by Juta Alperin. I'm curious how it'll work out [...] whom will they applaud? Mrs. Kaufman said that before the recitation of the poem they would announce that I was the author, so that's how it is to be...

[...] That's the way it is in the world and I have to reconcile myself to it. I was told to write it, to make some effort, etc. and after all that I'm disposable? [...] I won't lie if I write that it's u n j u s t.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 21 March 1944

Because of the starvation in the ghetto people steal food from other people when they are at work, or when they aren't at home. It happens in our place, too. Unfortunately.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 22 March 1944

...I'm losing my strength (not necessarily my inner strength), but that's enough. I'm so weak that sometimes I don't feel any hunger. It's awful (hunger used to have a bad effect on me). A skirt that was made for me at the beginning of the course (a few months ago) is hanging loose on me. I don't exaggerate... what will happen? What will happen? And on top of everything—Passover. I don't know. God! God! Send us some help!

*Comment:* **Urszula SobieckaTrojanowska, dietician**

The food supplied to the ghetto was of poor quality and strictly regulated. Those

who worked received very modest allocations. Small portions of food could also be bought. This was a deliberate action of the part of the Germans.

One-quarter of the prisoners in the ghetto died of starvation and complications resulting from prolonged periods of negative caloric intake and the deprivation of basic nutrients (meat, bread, potatoes). This four-year period of torment, repression, persecution, humiliation, and, chiefly, of physical starvation and starvation for freedom became a nightmare that would break even the strongest of personalities. There is not a thing a person would not do out of hunger and its accompanying ailments. When the turning point comes, the feet and legs become limp and the body slowly begins the process of dying. Death from starvation ensues. Such a death is not fit for legends or tales, but it was experienced by the majority of the Jews imprisoned in the ghetto.

Starvation leads to the destruction of the body and retrograde changes in the organs as well as to brain chemistry. This is followed by profound psychological changes affecting mental and emotional competences, leading finally to the extreme mental and physical exhaustion tied to the loss of strength and indifference towards the utter agony they are suffering.

The physical symptoms of starvation are caused by a lack of glucose in the blood. Glucose levels are managed by the centers for hunger and satiation in the hypothalamus. These in turn command us: you have to get food and eat it to live. Associated with starvation is the concept of malnutrition, a prolonged and deepening phase of a negative balance of energy due to the deficiency of essential nutrients. The first symptoms of starvation are fatigue, disorientation, reduced immunity and irritability. Prolonged starvation slows down all of the body's functions and deepening caloric deficits due to the lack of food slow down organ activity and capabilities, causing their failure, and psychological apathy. This leads to hallucinations, major depression, spasms, convulsions and irregular heartbeat, reduced immunity and irritability. All of this is accelerated by extreme dehydration and demineralization. The chronic malnutrition that was experienced by everyone imprisoned in the ghetto leads to exhaustion and marasmus. A body in this state is apathetic, devoid of strength, with a significantly reduced body weight. The next stage is bloating, caused by a decrease in white blood cells. People lose their hair as well as fatty tissue and muscle. This leads to death.

Autopsies carried out in other ghettos reveal that one result of a slow death from starvation is the atrophy of certain internal organs, most often the heart, liver, spleen and kidneys. The livers of the deceased weighed an average of 56 grams (as opposed to approximately 2 kilograms in healthy people). The bones had become spongy and soft. The lowest recorded heart weight was 110 grams (approximately 300 grams in healthy people). Only the brain did not change in proportion – it remained approximately 1300 grams in each stage of starvation.

The average weight of the inhabitants of the ghetto was significantly lower than pre-war weights, for example middle-aged women (30 years old) weighed 24–28 kg. There was large-scale dystrophy and atrophy, which made it seem like the body was "consuming itself". First, fatty tissue disappeared, then muscle, and the weight of the fibrotic liver. The first sign of dystrophy was swelling, followed by the body beginning to "dry up". In the last phase, there remained only a skeleton covered by skin. The exhausted person became increasingly more apathetic and sluggish before finally expiring.

Food rations were very small in 1942: 2 kg of potatoes per week, a little flour, bread for eight days and watery soup at work. Per week, this totals about 2,500 kcal, giving about 360 kcal per day for adults. The daily caloric requirements for a body are greater than the weekly ration given out in the ghetto. Children received smaller portions than adults.

In order to increase their portions, they also ate scraps and leftovers – at a certain point in the ghetto's history, a mere potato peel became a valuable and desired commodity. Desperate people scrounged for the remnants of roots in the soil. They also consumed products previously deemed inedible, such as onion powder (ground onion husks) or what was known as "cocoa", which was actually powdered brick...

Weight loss due to caloric deficiencies was about 1 kg per week. Working women must have lost 3–4 kg per month due to these conditions. Counting various supplements to their rations (food that was smuggled, obtained on the black market, carrion, rodents and other animals) those women who did not die of complications from starvation lost an average of 20–30 kg of their body mass per year.

Our calculations are only theoretical. They assume that women working every day (7 days per week) really received the promised food rations. What was on paper. In fact, depending on the person's rung on the complicated social ladder of the

ghetto, the allocations and additions were more or less depleted. The supply of food was not regular, as food rations were reduced over time and several days of supply disruptions also occurred.

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 11 April 1944

I have so much to write that I don't know where to start. Well, never mind. It's the second day of the holidays. How was the first day? How was the Seder? The Seder? How could it be?! *Nebekh*! Oh, Daddy's absence made our life miserable. The Seder without Daddy, but not only without Daddy, without men at all …

Last year there were no men either, but our aunt was here. She could replace a man, because she was an adult and knew a lot, but today? She's gone. The Seder was celebrated by Estusia. It's true that she did it very well, but… oh, this "but" is so sad! God, was I really at fault, that you punished me so much? I have friends in the workshop who have fathers, but their fathers don't celebrate the Seder. But why?

[…] If my Daddy had celebrated the Seder, I'd have been so happy! Others have their fathers (they are lucky), but they don't want the Seder at all. […] Just to think that Daddy will never celebrate the Seder for us, never. It's been the third year and I still can't reconcile myself to this thought. Daddy will never celebrate the Seder for us. It sounds so painful. It hurts so much!

[…] I prayed to God so that the next Seder would be celebrated by Abramek …

## *Comment:* Michelle Greenberg, Rabbi

Passover is one of my favorite holidays. It is celebrated in homes, in family groups, rather than at a synagogue. The story of a people's movement from the narrow place of slavery to the open opportunity of autonomy is told through a long family meal, the seder. Interspersing story, song, and symbolic foods, it is as if each Jew is "he, himself" personally redeemed from Egypt. Passover focuses on family. It is the first born child that is slain by the Angel of Death – can you imagine the wails of pain and despair that must have arisen from the Egyptians? Their families were torn apart, so when a Jew celebrates Passover, she is hyper-aware of the family unit that surrounds her. Jews remember their first seders when our father or grandfather told the story of our freedom, so to have a holiday that is based in family, based in the relationships, but without the correct players is painful and debilitating for Rywka. It is a story told by an elder generation to a younger generation, so to lose the prior generation places the responsibility on the young people to remember and tell the story. It also clearly demonstrates just how much they have lost.

My own memories of seder meals always include my father sitting at the head of the table, the *haggadah* (the book that guides the seder) in his left hand and a glass of wine raised in prayer in his right hand. Each seder he begins by telling the story of his first Passover memory. He stood on a chair at the table when it came time for the youngest to ask the questions that start our retelling of the story. His grandfather would whisper the Hebrew in his ear, and my father would chant it to the family…. The awareness and presence of the Nazis at Rywka's seder table would have been profound. The ghosts of her parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles whispered about her as the Nazis stood guard over the ghetto. A traditional seder is a place of safety for elders to share their stories of redemption with the younger generations. For Rywka, the responsibility fell to her when she was too young.

## The last preserved entry from Rywka Lipszyc's diary:

## Litzmannstadt Getto, 12 April 1944

Oh, the weather is so beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful! Oh, I'm so happy, it's such a great comfort...

... when I was walking home I realized how beautiful youth was. If I only had a piece of paper, I'd have written something. Later, I recalled the "Ode to Youth" and it happened that I had this very volume of Mickiewicz with me.

[...] We look at this wonderful world, this beautiful spring, and at the same time we see ourselves in the ghetto deprived of everything, we're deprived of everything, we don't have the smallest joy, because, unfortunately, we're machines with well developed animal instincts. [...] It all affects us so much that we become duller and duller...

[...] Oh, God, how much longer? I think that only when we are liberated we will enjoy a real spring. Oh, I miss this dear Spring...

First, Ms. Hania (from the office) informed us that those born in 1926/27 could work for 10 hours and have Lang. But they would need a document from the Registration Department stating their dates of birth. I'm afraid nobody will apply. For now, I'm glad about this turn of events, because I was born in 1927, but actually...

### *Comment:* Dr. Monika Polit, literary scholar

According to the semi-conspiratorial *Biuletyn Kroniki Codziennej* [Daily Chronicle Bulletin], in which ghetto archivists noted the weather, births and deaths, the number of people shot at the borders of the ghetto, suicidal attacks, food rations or average prices, on Wednesday, 12 April 1944, two boys were born in the ghetto and nine people died. The day was sunny and the temperature was around 20 degrees

Celsius, as it had been for the past several days. The Bulletin records 77,574 ghetto residents. Those who were older than 16 could apply to work 10-hour shifts and get additional "*lang*" [Ger. "long"] food rations.

The decision was announced at the end of 1943 by Hans Biebow, the head of the German ghetto administration. In March 1944, another extra food ration was introduced for those who worked overtime. Józef Zelkowicz, one of the authors of the Bulletin, wrote in his diary:

"Wednesday 1 March 1944,

"From now on, those who work longer will receive additional food stamps, and people who fall into categories of 'long work', 'hard work' or 'overnight work' will get 35 decagrams of flour, 10 decagrams of meat and 2 decagrams of oil… This is the food ration that the authorities dedicated for workers employed at the hardest jobs, who use their last strength."

Unfortunately, the additional food rations that the exhausted inmates of the ghetto counted on were revoked in early June 1944.

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