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## Hunger Reels: Nazi Footage of the Warsaw Ghetto and Images of Starvation

Images of starving Jewish children have come to visually define the experience of forced starvation in the Warsaw ghetto. Typically, photographs and film footage from the Jewish district are dubbed propaganda, since photographers and film camera operators acted as agents following an ideological blueprint, capturing a biased perception of the people in front of the camera. At times, the question arises as to whether each and every photographer shared this worldview. This in turn leads to interpretations of photographers' intentions and speculation as to the existence of any empathy towards their models. Inasmuch as I appreciate the merit of such inquiries, there remains an inherent difficulty in reading intentions from photographs and usually a need arises to confront the visual evidence with written and/or oral sources. Instead, I sketch out the following aspects of representing hunger: food (its lack, abundance, and distribution), starving bodies, and emaciated corpses. An informative discussion of such representations cannot omit the status of documentary film as an agent of social change and a tool to rectify social injustice. However, the Third Reich incorporated these goals in its grand project, promising a glorious future to the members of the German national community at the expense of racial and political enemies. Nazi scapegoating portrayed Jews as an obstacle to the plan, and to this end visual propaganda blamed them for a variety of transgressions: from biological impurity, to polluting the "Aryan" gene pool, controlling world finance and politics behind-the-scenes, to communism.

The ghettoisation of Jews provided an opportunity to present these communities in a "natural" state despite the fact that their existence was regulated and insufficient distribution of food was meant to trigger their mass starvation. On the other hand, Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto (as well as in other closed districts) chronicled their own day-to-day struggle for survival, the early symptoms of hunger disease, the debilitating effects of insufficient provisions, the smuggling of food, and the deaths of others. Their level of self-reflection and focus on the minutiae of starvation is breathtaking. The body of these accounts provides a necessary counterbalance to the silent footage taken by Nazi cameramen in the Warsaw Ghetto, on a number of different occasions, for the production of a documentary on life in the Ghetto (undertaken in the spring of 1942).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless,

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1 Compare Tomasz Łysak, "The Posthumous Life of Nazi Propaganda, Postwar Films on the Warsaw Ghetto," *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. Natascha Drubek). Special Double Issue of *Apparatus: Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 2-3. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17892/app.2016.0002.17>.

with the exception of staged scenes meant to falsely represent Jewish lewdness by showing naked men and women together in the Jewish ritual bath (*mikveh*), the various societal contrasts highlighted by the cameramen were already documented by diarists and journalists in the Ghetto. Mass starvation did not affect everybody to the same degree or at the same time. Peretz Opoczynski describes an elaborate network for the provision of food in his report on an open air market in Koźła Alley and how food was smuggled there to be sold (October 1941). In order to show the extent to which the chosen few profited from Nazi restrictions on the quantity and quality of food, Opoczynski highlights the efforts of smugglers' wives to present a false image of their families living in poverty despite the fact that smugglers' children were being served breakfasts that other children could only dream about.<sup>2</sup> He also defines the Ghetto's financial elite in terms of their physical appearance: "stout, well-fed Jews, making deals and trading political rumors."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the journalist is not blind to the fact that smugglers provided food to those who had the financial means to cover its ever-increasing cost: "Thanks to its trade, some tens of thousands of Jews are able to survive who would have perished from hunger with money in their pockets if Koźła Alley had not served as their storehouse."<sup>4</sup> However, Opoczynski does not limit his socio-economic analysis of the distribution of wealth in the Ghetto to just the privileged, pointing out the multitudes who could not afford to buy smuggled food. Some of them came to die in front of the food stores in Koźła but nobody paid the slightest attention to their bloated corpses.<sup>5</sup> In the crowded streets members of different social classes rubbed shoulders and Opoczynski notices contrasts and the underlying mechanisms of the everyday struggle for survival. Such a strategy runs contrary to the all-encompassing pessimism of the street jester Rubinstein, who would repeat his slogan "ale glach" ("everybody's equal"), negating any distinction between the haves and the have-nots. In the end, Rubinstein's dark prophecy proved accurate but Opoczynski's ambition was not to talk about the future but to present a portrait of social stratification in the closed district (zeroing in on prewar social groups and newly-formed ones). Furthermore, a group of Jewish doctors scientifically studied hunger disease, clandestinely researching the phenomenon of starvation, citing ethical and academic reasons for their work. Their research (eventually published after the war) was a form of resistance and a rare occasion to conduct such a study on humans.<sup>6</sup>

We must now mention the moment the film was produced: directly preceding the liquidation

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2 *In Those Nightmarish Days: The Ghetto Reportage of Peretz Opoczynski and Josef Zelkowicz*, ed. and with an introduction by Samuel D. Kassow, transl. and co-edited by David Suchoff, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2015, p. 80.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 81.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 84.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 81.

6 *Hunger disease: studies by the Jewish physicians in the Warsaw ghetto*, ed. Myron Winick, transl. Martha Osnos, Wiley, New York 1979.

of the Ghetto (known as the Great Action, which started on 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1942). In the spring of that year, the majority of the population was starving, while a typhus epidemic, other diseases, and hunger, took their toll on the community. The Jewish district was forced to cooperate in the production of the film, providing locations and “actors” as well as facilitating the shooting. The main goal of the film – as far as can be gleaned from the available materials – was to show Jews in their “natural state,” namely, how their behaviour was not governed by the rules of modern society. These conditions – orchestrated by the German administration – were intended to “reveal” Jewish bestiality, deficient hygiene, a lack of empathy for the suffering of others, selfishness etc. With this goal in mind, a number of film techniques were utilised: staging (rather than impartial observation<sup>7</sup>), the montage of contrasting scenes and contrasting people in one shot (old and young, affluent and poor) in order to convey the message of the film, and numerous takes to make sure the desired effect was achieved. The choice of film techniques hinged on the biased interpretation of the topic. To an extent, the adopted techniques serve to produce an ethnographic documentary with Jews in the Ghetto presented as an indigenous tribe. To this effect, key aspects of life came under scrutiny and the filmmakers’ feeling of supremacy is conspicuous. The cycle of life is presented: from birth till death. Circumcision symbolises new life while two funerals stand for the other liminal event. A ceremonious burial procession finds its opposite in the disgraceful dumping of starved corpses into an open pit at the Jewish cemetery. Eating is by no means just a question of biological survival, on the contrary, highlighting unequal access to nourishing food serves to implicitly accuse the Ghetto elites of selfishness and to bemoan the decline in solidarity (Fig. 1). Thus, nutrition is a token of the corruption of social relations.

Israeli director Yael Hersonski in *A Film Unfinished* (2010) dissects the rough edit of the Nazi film. In her opinion, in the absence of a voice-over we cannot be sure about the final intentions of the film. Hersonski reasonably argues that the meaning of a given audiovisual production stems from a combination of the visual and audio commentary. On the other hand, the sequence of the images as well as how they were selected makes it possible to infer a master narrative and probable authorial viewpoint. In resorting to audiovisual ethnography, the film shows the inevitable fate of the culture in question: it faces imminent extinction due to its own shortcomings in managing resources. However, inasmuch as it accuses the haves of insensitivity towards the have-nots, the sheer mass of dead bodies – victims of disease and starvation – leaves no doubt as to the fact that no form of social solidarity could have saved all of the starving people. What is more, there is an afterimage, imprinted in the potential audience, that starvation is the key cause of death in the

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7 Truth be told, the idea of “impartial observation” as a defining characteristic of a documentary only gained currency in the 1960s.

Ghetto. Despite the fact that the film was not meant to be a depiction of hunger, inadequate nutrition and its social consequences are a recurring motif. The appearance of people in the streets – emaciation, poverty and disease – makes it clear that access to food must have been limited. Their behaviour when given food shows that it was a rare occasion to satisfy their hunger. To further underline the value of food, different measures taken to protect it against theft are shown: street vendors hide bread under wire mesh and glass panes, and shop fronts separate the hungry masses from the merchandise (Fig. 2).

Boys captured smuggling food into the ghetto are shown as if caught playing a prank, with vegetables shaken out from beneath their clothing. On the other hand, Rachela Auerbach – a writer who worked in a kitchen soup – describes a similar scene of torture in which young boys had their clothes slashed to reveal hidden food.<sup>8</sup> These victims had their contraband destroyed beyond the gaze of the shooting camera. In reality, approximately 95 per cent of food<sup>9</sup> was smuggled and big-time smuggling was organised in cooperation with the Jewish police and German guards who turned a blind eye to bulk transports entering the Ghetto. Another method involved throwing food over the Ghetto wall, pushing it through holes in it, or using other ingenious ways. It comes as no surprise that the system of bribes facilitating this illegal economy was not shown in the film. Instead, children, who at times became the sole breadwinners for their families, were exposed as a group involved in criminal behaviour. In fact, their capture resulted in being shot on the spot and not just being humiliated in front of a camera. Group smuggling created new financial elites often at the cost of impoverishing the former – especially intellectual – elites. It also entailed a division of labour as a businessman had his own team who risked all while just he reaped the profits. To put things in perspective, the insufficient official food rations (ca. 200 calories per day<sup>10</sup>) made it necessary to rely on the illegal provisions. The necessity of smuggling created a network of people involved in it both inside and outside the closed district. The Jewish administration sponsored self-help solutions: soup kitchens and distributing additional food (Fig. 3). However, in the absence of sufficient provisions these measures could merely prolong the agony.

On the other hand, there is a paradox in showing the confiscation of vegetables. If Jews are forced to smuggle food, their malnutrition stems from the mismanagement of food provisions. Therefore, a question of responsibility arises: who is to blame for the situation? Is it “race” or the administration of the Ghetto (both German and Jewish)? Finally, since the contraband can hardly be

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8 Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: a Guide to the Perished City*, transl. Emma Harris, Yale UP, New Haven 2009, p. 448.

9 Engelking and Leociak estimate that this number was between 80 and 97.5 per cent.

10 There was a huge discrepancy between the official rations and the actual nutritional value of consumed food, as shown by Engelking and Leociak (p. 417).

called the “gourmet food” shown in other parts of the film, there must have been alternative forms of approvisionnement sanctioned or overlooked by the administration. The question of agency is tied to assigning moral responsibility. By presenting the Ghetto as a self-governing entity, the filmmakers shift the onus of responsibility onto the Jewish community. However, the agency of Warsaw’s Jews was restricted both by the official regulations and the social reality of the closed district. Thus, the black market functioned due to the fact that it was tolerated by the authorities (in contrast to the Litzmanstadt Ghetto in Łódź, where there was no possibility of smuggling in part due to the introduction of a Ghetto currency, worthless outside the district).

Apart from the black-and-white footage, a single colour reel has been preserved. It shows an open-air market with food stands: butchers (most probably selling horse meat), a bakery (with bread protected by a glass pane), eggs and vegetables (Fig. 4). The customers look healthy which contrasts with the first scene on the reel showing the Jewish cemetery and an undertaker throwing the emaciated corpse of a child into a mass grave. Hungry children appear in front of another butcher’s shop: judging by the number of takes, the scene was deemed highly symbolic. To create the impression of the shop owner's indifference, the children are instructed on how to move in front of the camera as we can see a uniformed member of the film crew directing them. The remaining running time is devoted to children begging in the street, suffering from hunger, and the motionless corpses of those who succumbed to hunger. The colour reel has a less polished style than the rest of the footage but there is a common interest in food as a factor defining social life and a measurement of morality. The scene in front of the butcher’s shop is an illustration of a recurrent fantasy in which starving people imagine food they once knew in better times. Thus, the shop window becomes a screen for their desire to satisfy their hunger. Some people in the film are given food they would not have received had the film not been produced. Distributing food by Germans would yet achieve a more sinister purpose, as during the liquidation of the Ghetto those who volunteered for resettlement via cattle trains were given bread and cheap marmalade. The deportees naturally hoped that this gesture proved the good intentions of Nazis as there would be no point in feeding people about to die.

A critical perspective on the Nazi footage is indispensable in order to look past the propagandist distortions embedded in the film. On the other hand, the Nazi cameramen captured elements of social reality which were glaringly obvious to the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto. By the time the film was being shot, many of them had become insensitive to the misery of others, having been witnesses to many a premature death themselves. What is more, they were fighting an uphill battle for survival using up their prewar resources. There are thus a number of reasons why we should devote attention to hunger. First, it is difficult to control its meaning as images of starved

children might trigger compassion contrary to the intentions of the film crew. Second, hunger lays bare the structures of power (who has access to food, money and, by extension, power). Third, it is difficult to show as a physiological state, so instead the filmmakers resorted to showing food, its distribution, and the bodily symptoms of starvation. Finally, mass starvation in modernity cannot be called a “natural catastrophe” as it is highly politicised with the distribution of food and relief motivated by the whims of the powers that be. Moreover, starvation reveals a social hierarchy – starving bodies are at the bottom. With the exception of those on the brink of starvation, the hunger-stricken strived to have their stories told on their own terms.

Fig. 1 A lavish party – a symbol of inequality in the Ghetto (screenshot from the Nazi film)

Fig. 2 Children eating in the street (screenshot from the Nazi film)

Fig. 3 A soup kitchen (screenshot from the Nazi film)