

BACKGROUND

In early 1940, in the city of Łódź, Poland, Gentiles were evicted by the German occupiers from the slum area of the Baluty district and forced to make way for the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were soon concentrated into the district from other parts of the city, elsewhere in Poland, and the rest of conquered Europe. The Germans sealed off the area's perimeter and renamed it "Getto Litzmannstadt" ("Łódź ghetto"). Among those forced to relocate there was the local lower middle class family of Majlech and Sara Sierakowiak and their two children, Dawid and Natalia. One by one, each of their lives was extinguished in the Holocaust.



Dawid Sierakowiak, courtesy of Ghetto Fighters House Archives

Dawid began his diary while at a Zionist youth camp in southern Poland prior to the German invasion of Poland in 1939. He continued his daily entries until shortly before he died of hunger and exhaustion ("ghetto disease") on August 8, 1943, some two weeks after his eighteenth birthday. He was an inspiring young intellectual, brave, dark-humored, astonishingly aware politically, and an outstanding student at the top of his class. He had studied Latin, Hebrew, English, German, and French. His classmates elected him president of the ghetto gymnasium student council.

Dawid's notebooks were found after the war by a man returning to his apartment at 20 Wawelska Street, the Sierakowiaks' address in the ghetto. According to the man's words, "a whole pile of notebooks filled with notes was lying on a stove. Someone must have been using them for firewood because some of them were torn up. They contained stories, poems, and other notes."

In the end, only five notebooks of at least seven Dawid wrote survived. Today, two of them are housed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and the other three reside in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Dawid's diary has been published in six languages and is considered one of the richest accounts of daily Jewish life written from within the German-perpetrated war against the Jews.

EXCERPTS

1939

Sunday, September 3. Łódź. An alarm at half past twelve at night. I curse as much as I can. In the street it's cold, dark, nasty. In the shelter we want to amuse ourselves a little, but as usual the females raise an uproar, shrieking that it's no joke, this is war. We leave for the street. Bombs and cold are better than old women. This should always be kept in mind. Long live humor; down with hysteria!...

[The next day there is] the first big air raid on Łódź. Twelve planes in triangles of three break through the defense lines and start bombing the city. We stand in front of the entry to our buildings' yard and watch the sky in spite of the danger....

Suddenly the planes turn in our direction, forcing us to fight our curiosity and hide in terror in the stairwell...and just when it seems that we will be bombed at any moment, they leave us in peace to breathe a sigh of relief. The planes finally disappear, which we announce in the shelter to the terrified, nerve-racked, crying women, some holding small babies in their arms. Truly a moving sight.

...

Wednesday, September 6. Łódź. God, what's going on! Panic, mass exodus, defeatism. The city, deserted by the police and all other state institutions, is waiting in terror for the anticipated arrival of the German troops. What happened? People run from one place to another finding no comfort: they move their worn bits of furniture around in terror and confusion, without any real purpose....

At home I meet our neighbor Mr. Grabiński, who has come back from downtown and tells about the great panic and anxiety that has taken hold of the people there. Crowds of residents are leaving their homes and setting off on a danger-filled trek into an unknown future. In the streets crying, sobbing, wailing.

I go to sleep, but a loud conversation wakes me at five in the morning. A neighbor, Grodzeński, is sitting there with his crying wife, telling us to leave. Where? Go where? Why? Nobody knows. To flee, flee farther and farther, trek, wade, cry, forget, run away...just run away as far as possible from the danger.... Father loses his head; he doesn't know what to do...finally the decision: stay put. Whatever will be will be.

...

Sunday, September 10. Łódź. ...Tomorrow is the first day of school. Who knows how our dear school has been? My friends are going there tomorrow to find out what's cooking, while I have to stay home. I have to! My parents say that they are not going to lose me yet. Oh, my dear school!...Damn the times when I complained about getting up in the morning and about tests. If only I could have them back!

...

Monday, September 18. Łódź. ...I am finally going to school tomorrow. Coeducational classes! There are great girls there, they say. Only let our education be normal. We are supposed to receive certificates of "immunity" so we won't be seized for work.

...

Tuesday, September 19. Łódź. I rode to school in a clean uniform (I came back on foot, however, and will go on foot every time now because there is no money to go by streetcar). At the gate I met two boys from our class....

...

Sunday, September 24. Łódź. The streets of Łódź feel eerie. Although richly decorated with Nazi flags, they are gray and sad. Dozens of [regulations], [public notices], and so on have been posted.... A person has to wait in line for bread for five or six hours, only to go away empty-handed 50 percent of the time. They are still seizing people for forced labor. Nothing seems to go well.

Wednesday, October 4. Łódź. I didn't escape the sad fate of my countrymen who are being seized for work. As luck would have it, some older people talked me into going to school by way of Wólczajska Street, a slightly shorter route. As I walked along there yesterday I could see almost nothing but swastikas on all the buildings along the street, as well as a lot of German cars and a great number of soldiers and Łódź Germans with swastikas on their arms. I somehow made it through and today, thus emboldened, I went the same way. Then,...some student from the German [school] ran up to me with a big stick in his hand and shouted [in German]: "Come work! You can't go

to school!" I did not resist because I knew that no papers could help me here. He took me to a square where over a dozen Jews were already at work picking up leaves! The sadistic youngster badly wanted to make me climb over a 2-meter-high fence, but seeing that I couldn't do it, he gave up and went away.

The work at the square was supervised by a single soldier, also with a big stick. Using rude words, he told me to fill puddles with sand. I have never been so humiliated in my life as when I looked through the gate to the square and saw the happy, smiling mugs of passersby laughing at our misfortune. Oh, you stupid, abysmally stupid, foolish blockheads! It's our oppressors who should be ashamed, not us.

Humiliation inflicted by force does not humiliate. But anger and helpless rage tear a man apart when he is forced to do such stupid, shameful, abusive work. Only one response remains: revenge!

1941

Sunday, April 6. Łódź. * I'm beginning a new notebook of my diary, and thus dare to express the wish that it will become the start of a new, brighter and better period in my life than the one I covered in the preceding notebook. That seems just another pipe dream, though. In spite of a gorgeous (and expensive) holiday food ration, the situation remains as tragic as before. There's no hope for improvement.

**No notebooks covering 1940 or the first four months of 1941 have been recovered. During that time, the Sierakowiak family, along with all the Jews remaining in Łódź, were forced into the area designated by the Germans as the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) ghetto.*

Wednesday, April 9. Łódź. The weather is still nasty. It's cold, and raining almost incessantly; absolutely no sign of the sun. It looks like there won't be any spring this year. I just hope that such weather won't have a tragic effect on the harvests.

This week I wrote an article about the plight of school youths for a newspaper organized by the textile workers' association (Communists). I handed it in today, but it seems to me that before anything comes of it (there are enormous technical problems), the article will be out of date.

...

Sunday, April 27. Łódź. The first day of school. The trip to Marysin is quite long, but the worst thing about it is the awful mud from the incessant rain. I must cross all kinds of fields, and my shoes are in terrible shape. They are beginning to "go," but any repair is out of the question. I suppose I'll soon have to rush to school barefoot.

Friday, May 2. Łódź. ...We continue to receive whole loaves of bread for our food rations, but now they check the weight carefully and, if needed, deduct or add the amount that the loaf's short. In any case, the loaf distribution system is no good. The portion of bread I receive won't feed me for more than two or three days; after that my stomach's empty, and all I can think of is the next loaf of bread.

...

Sunday, May 11. Łódź. It's raining constantly, and it absolutely won't get warm this year. I feel awful and look worse and worse. I hear that it's hard to recognize me.

...

Friday, May 16. Łódź. I have been examined by a doctor at school. She was terrified at how thin I am. She immediately gave me a referral for X rays. Perhaps I will now be able to get a double portion of soup in school. In fact, five such soups would be even better, but the two will do me some good, too. In any case, one soup is nothing. The checkup has left me frightened and worried. Lung disease is the latest hit in ghetto fashion; it sweeps people away as much as dysentery or typhus. As for the food, it's worse and worse everywhere. It's been a week since there were any potatoes.

...

Saturday, July 19. Łódź. All day long I had nothing to eat but water (soup) in the kitchen. It's more and more difficult for me to go on starving. In the past I was able to not eat all day and still hold on somehow, but now I'm an empty pot. I was so weakened by the lack of soup at school that I thought I would collapse.

1942

Monday, May 25. Łódź. There are no vegetables in the June ration, not even potatoes. Now Rumkowski won't have to bother himself that people have eaten their potatoes too early; we won't even have a chance to see them this time. The situation is worsening, and there is no hope for the end.

They keep relocating Jews from small neighboring towns...into the ghetto, while the deportations from the ghetto have been stopped. Even that chance for getting out of the ghetto has been taken away. Death is striking left and right. A person becomes thin (an "hourglass") and pale in the face, then comes the swelling, a few days in bed or in the hospital, and that's it. The person was living the person is dead; we live and die like cattle.

...

Saturday, September 5. Łódź. My most Sacred, beloved, worn-out, blessed, cherished Mother has fallen victim to the bloodthirsty German Nazi beast!!! And totally innocently, solely because of the evil hearts of two Czech Jews, the doctors who came to examine us....

...[T]wo doctors, two nurses, several firemen, and policemen entered our building completely unexpectedly. They had lists with the names of the tenants in every apartment. A frantic, unexpected examination began. The doctors... started an extremely thorough examination of every tenant, and fished out a great many of the "sick and unable to work," and the ones whom they described as [in German] "questionable reserve." My unfortunate dearest mother was among the latter.... The shabby old doctor who examined her...kept shaking his head, saying to his comrade in Czech, "Very weak, very weak."...

...My mother has been caught, and I doubt very much that anything will save her.

...My poor mother, who always feared everything, yet invariably continued to believe in God, showed them, in spite of extreme nervousness, complete presence of mind. With fatalism and with heartbreaking, maddening logic, she spoke to us about her fate. She kind of admitted that I was right when I told her that she had given her life by lending and giving away provisions, but she admitted it with such a bitter smile that I could see she didn't regret her conduct at all, and, although she loved her life so greatly, for her there are values even more important than life, like God, family, etc.

She kissed each one of us good-bye, took a bag with her bread and a few potatoes that I forced on her, and left quickly to her horrible fate. I couldn't muster the willpower to look through the window after her or to cry. I walked around, talked, and finally sat as though I had turned to stone. Every other moment, nervous spasms took hold of my heart, hands, mouth, and throat, so that I thought my heart was breaking. It didn't break, though, and it let me eat, think, speak, and go to sleep.

...Meanwhile, if Mom had only left home, nothing would have happened to her. And so, someone else's baby has been saved in our home, while my mother has been taken. [My sister] Nadzia screamed, cried, suffered spasms, but these days it doesn't move anyone. I am speechless and close to madness.

1943

Sunday, April 4. Łódź. My state of mind is worsening every day. The fever persists, and I look like a complete "death notice." I can't bring my irritated skin back to normal, either.

In politics there's still nothing new. The war is extending infinitely, and here I am with no more strength. Everyone in the ghetto is sick. TB is spreading unbelievably, and there is a great number of other infectious and noninfectious diseases. Nadzia has noticed symptoms of scabies on her body again. If things continue like this, I will go crazy. Oh, this horrible, endless hopelessness. No chance or hope for life.

Thursday, April 15. Łódź. ...I am completely sick, and I have a high fever. I bought a Bayer medication for the flu, fever, and cold, for Nadzia and me. Nadzia stays in bed, and I think she will remain there for another day or two. Mrs. Deutsch came to see me today.... I think she is the most devoted friend I have in the ghetto, or anywhere else for that matter.

In the evening I had to prepare food and cook supper, which exhausted me totally. In politics there's absolutely nothing new. Again, out of impatience I feel myself beginning to fall into melancholy. There is really no way out of this for us.

Here the last of Dawid Sierakowiak's surviving notebooks breaks off. He died four months later of tuberculosis, starvation, and exhaustion, the syndrome known as "ghetto disease."

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