

9 Labor and Food in the Ghettos

A red “work permit”
A yellow “Kennkarte” in hand
Grab the Kennkarte and flee with your life
If the guard will let you pass!
For there’s no life for a Jew in the ghetto,
If the right to get out is denied
If fate throws him into the ghetto
Of hunger, in no time he’ll die.¹

– Gustava Steindig-Lindberg

Labor in the ghettos was an area where communal survival strategies and individual survival strategies intersected. On the communal level, the Germans demanded that the Jewish communal leadership provide workers and keep those workers fed. The Jewish communal leadership struggled in various ways to feed the whole ghetto population while meeting German labor demands. On the individual level, ghetto inhabitants sought employment to both meet their nutritional needs and protect themselves from deportation. Unfortunately most jobs did not both protect against deportation and provide enough income to meet one’s nutritional needs. As a result, numerous ghetto dwellers engaged in strategies of changing from job to job or mobilizing households to cover both needs. Ultimately, in all three ghettos, control over food supply was removed from the Jewish leadership, and only Jewish laborers in the ghettos were deemed worthy of food. This meant that obtaining food and avoiding deportation were linked to labor.

Labor in the Three Ghettos

Labor played a different role in each of the three ghettos. In the case of Kraków, only 25 percent of the prewar Jewish population was permitted to move into the Kraków ghetto, with the remainder forced into ghettos in the surrounding region. To receive permission to stay in the Kraków ghetto, most individuals had to demonstrate that they were employed

and needed to remain in or near the city. This meant that unlike in Łódź or Warsaw, where all Jews in the city regardless of employment or ability to support oneself were forced into the ghetto, in Kraków it was predominantly workers who were permitted into the ghetto. Additionally, since a great deal of that work happened outside the ghetto, at least initially, the ghetto was not as reliant on German food supply. Residents were able to supply themselves with food from outside the ghetto.

In the case of the Łódź ghetto, the lack of smuggling and inability of the workers to leave and enter the ghetto meant that the ghetto was largely reliant on German food deliveries. As a result, the Jewish community needed to pay for the food entering the ghetto through the *Transferstelle* (transfer office) with labor and/or finished products. This forced the communal leadership, with support from the German ghetto administration, to find ways to put the population to work. Łódź, a pre-war industrial city with a large number of skilled laborers, transformed into a production behemoth. The ghetto leader Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski employed a strategy of labor in exchange for food and longevity. The Central Bureau of Factories was added to the Jewish ghetto administration in Łódź in October 1940. By December 1942, 7,000 machines were operating in the ghetto.² By 1943, approximately 80,000 ghetto inhabitants were employed, and Hans Biebow could boast of 18,000 machines.³

In the Warsaw ghetto, the *Transferstelle*, which was to supply the ghetto with its official food resources, in fact provided so little in terms of food that the ghetto population was largely fed through other means. By July 1941, the ghetto was even able to bypass the *Transferstelle* in order to obtain food. Without this pressure to trade labor to the Germans for food, the Warsaw ghetto population was not largely employed in official capacities. Although it had approximately 173,000 individuals of working age as of September 1941, only 50,000–60,000 people at the time were employed, including an estimated 15,000 people working in illicit avenues.⁴ The German authorities in the spring of 1941 began to seek ways to employ a greater percentage of the Jewish population.⁵ By June 1942, just before the Great Deportation, an estimated 80,000–95,000 people in Warsaw were employed.⁶ Only productive employment shielded Warsaw ghetto inhabitants from deportation.

Forced Labor

From the very beginning of the Nazi invasion, the Germans demanded Jewish labor. Prior to the creation of the ghettos, Jews were rounded up off the streets for forced labor. Eventually, in all three cities, labor offices

under the auspices of the Judenrat were established and made responsible for supplying labor. After the ghettos were created, the Germans continued to demand Jews to serve as day laborers and to be sent to labor camps. Those sent to forced labor for the day or the labor camps were subject to horrific conditions. Each of the three ghettos targeted those otherwise unemployed for forced labor. In part, they managed to keep track of the unemployed by requiring everyone to register for food rations and welfare benefits. A portion of those people who were unemployed were so by choice; their families were able to support them, and so they did not work. These individuals often did not have to do forced labor. Buying one's way out of forced labor was an official option in Warsaw and unofficially practiced elsewhere, with individuals paying others to go to forced labor in their stead. This meant that those engaged in forced labor were often those without resources to avoid it.

Although employment in workshops or factories might not pay particularly well or provide sufficient food, its conditions were not as terrible as those of forced day-labor assignments, which were often completed under brutal conditions and without food. Kraków ghetto survivor Henry Brauner was forced to do snow removal, chipping ice from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.⁷ Hard labor expends a great deal of calories. Forced labor was therefore particularly brutal for those who were already food insecure and most likely to be seized for this type of work. Those subjected to forced labor in the Warsaw ghetto did not receive a meal and were only paid 2.8 zloty for their day's work, an amount that was not enough to survive on.⁸ Even more difficult was outdoor forced labor during the winter as being outside in the cold expends a great deal of calories. For those who were already quite hungry, hard labor in the Polish winter might be a death sentence.

Forced labor might also be entirely uncompensated. Pauline Buchenholz recalled that her father's forced labor in Kraków was not compensated, but while working alongside train tracks he was able to collect bits of coal, which her mother sold in the ghetto.⁹ In the Kraków ghetto, numerous survivors recalled incidents where they were subject to forced labor. Halina Nelken was fortunate to be fed a small lunch while on a forced labor assignment of tidying army barracks: "a soup consisting of kasha, macaroni, and a tiny bit of meat."¹⁰ More often, however, those engaged in forced labor found themselves to be the targets of abuse.

In addition to facing official forced labor assignments – and despite the labor offices meant to prevent abuses – people were regularly rounded up off the ghetto streets for unofficial, uncompensated forced labor. Chaim Hasenfus, an accountant before the war, was accosted in the Warsaw ghetto by a German officer to do a small forced labor job. According to

Hasenfus, "I was going down Walicówa Street when a German soldier struck me on the head with his rubber nightstick and ordered me, along with several other Jews, to load gravel onto a truck. The work lasted half an hour."¹¹

In the Warsaw ghetto, the wealthy could often buy their way out of forced labor camps. In the Łódź ghetto, some people actually volunteered to go, in the belief that it might be better than the ghetto and provide more food. Łódź ghetto diarist Hersz Fogel noted, "The registration of men volunteering for work on the railway in Poznań is taking place. 200 people leave today, they had to undergo a medical examination first. There's quite a lot of volunteers. No wonder, everyone wants to escape from this hunger-stricken camp in search of luck and, most importantly, food at some job [outside the ghetto]."¹²

To stave off starvation, some individuals not only volunteered for labor camps but also took on dangerous jobs, temporarily, that provided more food. Removing waste from the Łódź ghetto was one such dangerous job that provided extra food. As one former fecalist described it:

The work of the fecalist was backbreaking and dangerous, and ultimately fatal, because we were always exposed to the germs of typhus and other contagious diseases. Yet death by starvation was such an immediate concern that it canceled out the fear of contagion and it tempted hundreds of people, even children[,] to undertake the job. A fecalist received an additional portion of soup every day and sometimes an additional food ration, which staved off death for a while.¹³

Josef Zelkowicz related a story told by a Łódź ghetto mother about the fate of her son, who "couldn't bear to watch how his mother and father were starving, how his younger brothers and sisters were starving. So he signed up for dirty labor and brought home two marks every day, Yes, two marks and a raging case of tuberculosis."¹⁴ Eventually this job became a punishment assignment meted out by ghetto courts.

Work Outside the Ghettos

With the creation of the ghettos, a greater number of Jews were put to work for the German authorities. However, in the early period of the ghettos, employers from outside the ghetto were able to keep their workers either through lodging them outside the ghetto or through having them move between the city and the ghetto to do their work. For example, the police order establishing the Łódź ghetto published in the *Lodscher Zeitung* stated that employers could petition to keep those Jews who were irreplaceable and necessary for economic reasons.¹⁵ In Kraków, the ghetto's Arbeitsamt (Labor Office) provided

stamps for the identification cards (Kennkarte) of people working outside the walls of the ghetto.¹⁶ The ability to continue working outside the ghetto had multiple benefits, including access to food at the lower, nonghetto prices.

Work outside the ghetto was short-lived in Łódź. In the Warsaw and Kraków ghettos, however, many individuals were employed outside the ghetto. Those working in such positions were given permits that gave them the ability to enter and exit the ghetto. Sometimes those working outside the ghetto were helping run their former businesses. Anna Ware's father had owned a tannery business in Kraków before the war. When Jews were no longer able to own businesses, he made an arrangement with friends who took over the business and hired Anna's father and other relatives as "essential workers." This provided Anna's family with the ability to remain in Kraków and, when outside of the ghetto for work, obtain adequate food for the family.¹⁷ At other times, Jews were able to secure jobs outside of the ghetto due to specific artisan skills. For example, Joseph Bau's mother, an expert hatmaker, worked in a shop outside the Kraków ghetto, which provided her with a pass to leave the ghetto. She used this mobility to obtain food for her family.¹⁸ Anna Heilman's father

registered as a wood carver. And as such, he got work in the German military cemetery, which was situated outside of the ghetto.... And he was able to bring from outside food, which was wonderful. We had again bread. Sometimes we had tomato, and potatoes, and whatever it is that he could. And with this pass, he was allowed to bring those things. And this helped us in terms of food.¹⁹

Additionally, many workers who worked in factories outside of the ghetto were fed a midday meal. Sylvia G., who worked at Kabelwerk, noted that the meals at the factory were better than what was available in the ghetto because there was no difference between the meals given to Jewish and non-Jewish workers.²⁰

Some positions, by virtue of what was done, required exiting the ghetto. Ziuta Grunhut's father, Mr. Grynberg, used his position in the Construction Department outside the ghetto to smuggle items in and out, including once a chicken that he brought into the ghetto by stuffing it in his pants.²¹ Those whose jobs gave them a permit to enter and exit often used it to procure food outside the ghetto at cheaper rates than inside the ghetto. Jan Rozanski had a work permit that allowed him to leave the ghetto at will, and he used it to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at shops on the Aryan side of Kraków.²²

A number of workers had positions in factories that were located outside the ghetto, particularly in Kraków. Those who had positions

outside the ghetto were able to obtain food there, either for immediate consumption or for smuggling into the ghetto. Kuba Beck worked in a factory outside the Kraków ghetto walls. He recalled, "Working outside the ghetto gave me an opportunity to smuggle some food in once in a while.... I brought in a few potatoes, some bread, a piece of cheese. It was very little but it helped."²³ Stella Müller-Madej's mother, Berta Müller, worked at a button factory that was headed by Frau Holzinger, a German who had lived with Stella's relatives the Grünbergs. Holzinger brought packages to the office that helped sustain Stella's family.²⁴ Alice Hemar, a Warsaw ghetto survivor, recalled, "We were working on the other side of the ghetto and coming back home. We had a chance to buy—to bring food to the ghetto. So I can consider myself a smuggler, and I don't mind."²⁵

Hierarchy of Work

There was a hierarchy of positions in the ghetto. Those at the very top included the high-level ghetto administration, which in Kraków and Łódź provided a salary and access to resources. In Warsaw, such positions were often unremunerated but provided protection from deportation and access to resources. Below that were positions that paid sufficiently in money and/or supplemental food to prevent starvation for an individual and their family, and that offered protection from deportation. These positions were rare in Łódź but more prevalent in Warsaw and Kraków. Beneath that were positions that either provided enough food or protected an individual from deportation – but not both. These positions might involve significant labor, which made the food supplements only sufficient to keep the individual from starving. Finally, a hodgepodge of jobs did not provide sufficient cash or food for survival and offered little protection during deportations. Those people who worked these jobs had low survival rates and had to find other, usually illicit, means to prevent death from starvation. Some of those who survived through illicit means existed in the ghetto without being officially registered, as only those who were officially registered and officially unemployed were subject to forced labor. Living in ghettos without being officially registered was a difficult and dangerous thing to do. Not only were such people ineligible for a ration card, but they were also subject to arrest and deportation if caught. As a result, for many in the ghetto, work had the dual purpose of providing protection from deportation and providing food. For those without valuables to exchange for food, it was the primary – or even, in some cases, the sole – means of getting something to eat.

Employment in the ghetto could help one obtain food in multiple ways: the income from working provided a means to purchase food, the employment sometimes meant free lunches or supplemental rations, and certain types of work came with the opportunity to obtain food. Supplemental rations or special soup kitchens were provided for many occupations in the ghetto including those employed in the Judenrat bureaucracy, particularly specialized positions like police, cemetery workers, and medical personnel as well as those who worked for workshops or factories that produced goods for German civilians and military. The ability to obtain food on the job or through opportunities provided by one's position also led to many being able to access additional food such as those who cleaned buildings or were involved in food distribution. In the case of Kraków and Warsaw, those employed by various civilian businesses outside the ghetto were often provided food at the job or the opportunity to obtain extra food outside the ghetto walls.

At different points in the existence of the ghettos, work positions determined who was eligible to stay – that is, who could avoid deportation. Sometimes positions that were among the best at the beginning of the ghetto no longer offered protections. Eventually, only those positions that served German military interests were allowed to persist. For example, in May 1942, a registration was conducted in the Kraków ghetto, during which those who had trades were given stamps on their Kennkarte, and those who were unemployed or had white-collar professions were denied the stamp. This registration was followed by a mass deportation the next month, when those without the stamp were rounded up and deported.²⁶ Jews' continued existence in the ghetto, individually and collectively, became linked with labor.

Social Networks and Jobs

Due to the importance of employment to surviving in the ghetto and often to obtaining food, getting a job was essential. A nine-year-old in the Łódź ghetto, Sarenka Lewi, drew that connection between food and a job when she petitioned the Łódź ghetto leader Rumkowski to help her mother get a job:

Good Mr. Chairman,

My name is Sarenka Lewi. I am 9 years old. My daddy works very hard, but he cannot feed our family. Aside from dried bread and soup from the soup kitchen, we do not have anything else. Dear Mr. Chairman, please put in a good word at the hat-making workshop to give my Mommy a job. Good Grandpa, have mercy on hungry Sarenka and write such a letter. I am very tired now.... I would like so much to survive the war.

Sarenka Lewi

June 8, 1941²⁷

Having the skills for a position was often not enough. Many in the ghetto mentioned the significance of having someone important who would support one's application for a position. Individuals with connections to Judenrat leadership, or to other influential people in the ghetto, used these relationships to obtain work. Kraków ghetto survivor Leon Fruchtmann used his influential connections from his work as an "office boy" to get a job in the Kraków ghetto shoveling potatoes. The benefit of shoveling potatoes was that he could get extra potatoes to help feed his family.²⁸ Sometimes people resorted to bribery to obtain a job.²⁹ Bribes could be as simple as gifting an item, making a payment, or trading a favor.

Work in the Ghetto

Community Employees: Bureaucrats, Food Service, and Police

Working for the Jewish ghetto administration was an important means of obtaining extra food rations. For all those who worked in the Judenrat bureaucracy, the pay was not very high. Even Judenrat leaders were not earning very much. In Kraków, they were paid only the equivalent of twenty loaves of bread per month, while in the Warsaw ghetto, some Judenrat leaders served without pay. One advantage the ghetto workers did enjoy, though, was work meals. All three ghettos had kitchens for employees of the community administration. In Warsaw, for example, this kitchen served meals for one zloty.³⁰ In both the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos, special stores allowed designated employees of the Judenrat to receive special distributions of items. Fogel, writing in his Łódź ghetto diary, complained that those entitled to these special rations, "received coupons for 5 marks: 1 kg of potatoes, 10 decagrams of sugar, 10 decagrams of butter, 10 decagrams of rye flakes, 15 decagrams of pork sausage. The poor worker, on the other hand, should die of starvation, since he's not entitled to anything!"³¹ Given the low salaries and the opportunities provided by their positions, it is not surprising that some Judenrat employees used their positions to supplement their incomes.

Sometimes, as in the case of food handlers, community employment meant the opportunity to eat a little extra. As one Łódź ghetto vegetable division worker noted in his diary, "It's impossible to die of hunger at the vegetable square—one can always eat a carrot here or a beetroot there. We are allowed to eat; it's only forbidden to take food home."³² Similarly, kitchen staff in the Łódź ghetto received four daily soups until May 5, 1942.³³ In addition, the staffs of the kitchens were

notorious for stealing from the kitchens.³⁴ In all the ghettos, people complained about the widespread corruption throughout the ranks of the Jewish ghetto administrations.

One group of community employees who were particularly blamed for corruption was the Jewish ghetto police force. In particular, the Warsaw ghetto police were widely accused of taking bribes. This is unsurprising because in Warsaw, unlike in Łódź and Kraków, the Jewish police worked without pay in the ghetto. However, the police in all the ghettos did enjoy many other privileges. Not only were they and their families exempt from deportations, they had more freedom of movement than did others. Marcel Grüner's father's position as a Kraków ghetto police officer entitled him to a permanent pass to go into the city of Kraków from the ghetto.³⁵ The police were also given higher rations than were the general public. In the Warsaw ghetto, in June 1941, they began receiving "Aryan" bread rations. In January 1942, they received an extra ration card for twelve kilograms of bread per month. All three ghetto police had their own kitchens.³⁶ In the Kraków ghetto, the police even supplied the black market due to their ability to enter and exit the ghetto.³⁷ Anatole Chari, a Sonderkommando member in the Łódź ghetto, noted that one of his jobs involved supervising and guarding food production. On one assignment he guarded the sauerkraut manufacturer, which discarded the outer leaves of cabbage as "waste." As a benefit of his job, he was able to take a huge duffle bag of cabbage leaves at the end of the day. He brought them to his grandparents, who turned them into sauerkraut to be eaten over the course of the winter.³⁸

Not all community positions protected against hunger. Many bureaucrats below the level of department manager did not receive sufficient food for survival. Even privileged positions like police and fire brigade did not guarantee against hunger. Jacob M., a member of the fire brigade in the Łódź ghetto, recalled that "I, too, was at one time so run down from hunger that I barely could do my duties as fireman. I was twice brought home in a state of collapse. When I looked at myself in the mirror, at times I saw death before my eyes." Jacob's inability to buy food to supplement the rations was tied to his salary. He earned three ghetto marks per day as a fireman, but "the cost of a loaf of bread on the black market [was] 1,300 marks."³⁹

In the later period of the ghettos' existence, these social and cultural services were curtailed or halted altogether. By mid-1942, Łódź began to transform into a labor camp. Only labor in factories or jobs deemed essential to the war effort could save individuals from deportation. Similarly, in Warsaw and Kraków, most support positions were no longer

available, and only work in a factory or other type of production job for the Germans protected against deportation.

Factory Work

A great deal of the work in the ghetto was in factories or workshops, which were run by either German firms or the ghetto itself. This work of creating finished products was extremely important: in both Łódź and Warsaw, the finished products produced in ghetto factories and workshops were one of the main sources of funding to purchase food for the ghetto. To that end, various attempts were made to keep workers better fed than the general population. This policy was to protect productivity against inefficient labor due to starvation. Many ghetto workshops and German factory owners with enterprises in or adjacent to a ghetto fed their workers at the place of work. In the Łódź ghetto, “at the workshops, the tailors who make sewing jobs for the military receive double rations of bread.”⁴⁰ In Warsaw, German manufacturers with operations in the ghetto requested that the Jewish ghetto administration provide meals for their workers.⁴¹ In the Kraków ghetto, when she was working as a seamstress, Gusta Rubinfeld received soup and bread at work.⁴²

In various ghetto jobs, workers were given supplemental meals as well as being fed a meal during work. Many workers would share their supplemental meals with family and smuggle home portions of the food they were given at work. Eventually supplemental meals for workers were distributed at work, and the workers were required to consume all of the food rather than take anything home to their families. Feeding workers at work also had the advantage of ensuring that the workers ate the meals themselves and had the strength to work. For example, without sufficient supplemental food, workers in the Warsaw ghetto were fainting in the workshops from hunger.⁴³

In many positions, although supplemental rations or midday meals were offered to employees, the rations provided simply were not enough to sustain the workers. An anonymous girl writing in her diary in the Łódź ghetto in February 1942 noted that her mother, brother, and sister all worked in the Saddler workshop, where “they get 15 dkg [decagrams] of bread and 5 dkg of sausage,” and additionally, “they bring 20 dkg of bread from home” to supplement their midday meal. The girl noted that “this is their food for the entire day and they work very hard.” Her father, a painter for the Construction Department, got a watery soup that he supplemented with twenty-five decagrams of bread from home. Despite the supplements that the working members of her family received, they were all hungry and losing weight.⁴⁴

Sometimes workers rebelled because the supplements were insufficient or taken away. On January 21, 1941, it was announced that supplemental bread rations for manual laborers were to be stopped in the Łódź ghetto to enable a 33 percent rise in rations to the whole ghetto population, which for the workers meant an effective reduction of 33 percent in bread rations.⁴⁵ The carpenters of the ghetto reacted with a sit-in strike, insisting that they could not perform heavy labor on the food they received and demanding more food.⁴⁶ The ghetto police were called in to disperse the strikers, but some workers erected a barricade and threw things at the police. The strike, which was broken by the Order Police resulted in many arrests and the closing of all the factories to prevent the spreading of unrest. Despite this caution, the grave diggers went on strike on January 26, 1941.⁴⁷ It is not surprising that this sort of protest occurred in Łódź, where the workers of the city were already quite organized.

Rumkowski used food to manipulate the carpenters into returning to work. Just after the strike, he offered fifty-eight decagrams of meat and two kilograms of potatoes to those who were working as an attempt to get the workers to return to their posts by the day of the distribution, one week after the start of the strike.⁴⁸ He also promised to improve the food situation of the workers to the best of his abilities. One of the promises was that Rumkowski would distribute meat and sausage, which he could only obtain in small quantities, to workers. Apparently, this had some effect as by January 29, 1941, some carpenters had returned to work. By February 1, all the carpenters decided to return to work.⁴⁹

The end of the Carpenters' Strike did not signal the end of unrest in the ghetto. Less than a month later, on February 24, 1941, as a tailor shop was being inspected, the workers began chanting, "Bread! Bread!" Rumkowski responded by closing down the shop.⁵⁰ A few weeks after that, on March 6, a seven-hundred-person-strong demonstration was organized to protest against the administration. The demonstrators' demands included an increase in rations, wages, and relief payments, decreases in the price of products, the removal of supplemental rations for high-ranking officials, free laundries for the poor, and the establishment of bathing and disinfection facilities.⁵¹ Numerous individual industries would again from time to time demand food ration increases, but the suppression of the Carpenters' Strike marked the end of large-scale demonstrations in the ghetto, especially violent resistance. Future "strikes" were often inversions of the previous food riots. For example, Jakub Poznanski recorded a strike in the tailoring workshop organized in response to the foreman who slapped and fired

four workers for little reason. As their form of protest, the strikers “refused to eat the soup due to them.”⁵²

Piecework

In addition to salaried factory work, a great deal of piecework was done in the ghettos. Unfortunately, piecework neither provided extra food (it was often done from home) nor paid particularly well. In the Kraków ghetto, Nelken described a piecework broom factory in which she briefly worked in October 1941. Each brush or broom that a worker produced earned them fifty groszy. According to Nelken, “The best, most experienced workers produce up to thirty brooms daily, about fifteen zloty, hardly the price of a loaf of bread.” Nelken only managed to finish one broom in the course of an hour.⁵³ The work, however, appears to have provided protection against unemployment, which in turn protected them from deportation or forced labor. As a result, despite the paltry remuneration, it was a sought-after occupation.⁵⁴ It was not just adults trying to obtain enough food to eat who made piecework brushes. Older children in orphanages were tasked with making brushes to help support the orphanage and supplement the charity collected on their behalf.⁵⁵

Private Employment and Supplemental Work

In addition to official positions, the ghettos had a wide-ranging private market for employment opportunities. Sometimes these were primary jobs, and at other times they were supplementary to another position. In her memoir of the Łódź ghetto, Lucille Eichengreen described her initial meeting with Shlomo Berkowicz, who worked in a lumberyard where he got an extra bowl of soup and sold items from a pushcart to supplement his income.⁵⁶ In the Warsaw ghetto, except for those in charge of wards, doctors at hospitals were not paid but rather earned money by seeing private patients. However, not all medical professionals were able to adequately sustain themselves through these side practices. One patient in the Warsaw ghetto complained that she could not stand visiting her doctor due to his complaints about malnutrition and his habit of wondering about their survival.⁵⁷ In the Łódź ghetto, which had to recruit doctors from Warsaw due to a shortage, doctors received payment and supplemental rations. Such incentives were not universal, however. People who had been medical students before the war were able to practice medicine but received a lower salary and no supplemental food rations.⁵⁸

Sometimes private employment was not just a supplement but the main means of support. Numerous individuals worked in the ghetto's private sector. Rabbinical scholars, for example, were supported by their followers or through private lessons. Privately run businesses also existed in the ghetto, including food distribution points, bakeries, nightclubs, private gambling establishments, brothels, restaurants, and goods shops.⁵⁹ Some individuals plied a trade or craft. For example, Bernard Offen's neighbor in the ghetto repaired shoes, and Leon Leyson's brother Tsalig repaired hot plates and electrical items.⁶⁰ Ultimately, however, much of the private economy disappeared after the mass deportations of nonworking Jews during 1942.

There were also domestic workers in the ghetto. Erica Ringelblum's mother tried to feed her children by washing clothes in exchange for soup in the Warsaw ghetto. This occupation was already low paying before the war and reveals the family's destitute state. It also reveals, however, that others in the ghetto had the means to spare a bowl of soup in order to avoid the labor of cleaning clothes. Erica's mother would drink some of the soup and then pass the bowl to each of her children to drink from.⁶¹ Those with means could hire others for personal tasks and errands in the private ghetto economy. Leyson ran errands from time to time for a woman in the Kraków ghetto. After he ran one errand for her, she cut him a thick piece of bread and spread it thick with butter. Leyson, recognizing the value of this payment, brought it home to his mother, who divided up that bread among all the family members: "She scraped off the butter, cut the bread into thinner slices and then spread the butter on each smaller piece. The whole family shared this rare treat."⁶² The cost of that piece of bread with a smear of butter was easily more than a single member of his family made on a given day.

One means by which individuals supported themselves in the ghettos either entirely or in part was prostitution. Prostitution was not legal in any ghetto but persisted despite efforts to combat it, for example through a vice squad in Łódź that tried to quell the practice. Jacob M., a deportee from Hamburg into the Łódź ghetto, noted that when he first arrived in the ghetto, prostitution was intense. Women would prostitute themselves for bread. He related, "we were in the ghetto. For a slice of bread they would go into a yard or somewhere."⁶³ As in other times, prostitution was employed as a full-time occupation as well as a stop-gap measure for those who needed additional funds for short-term purposes. Sometimes people prostituted themselves for supplemental food to support someone who was sick. Erna Fridman recalled her friend Yozek's mother using her relationship with men to obtain food to save her sick son.⁶⁴

The cafés that catered to the wealthiest ghetto dwellers were one of the main spaces in which prostitutes solicited business in all three ghettos. In some cases, the café staff doubled as prostitutes. There were also prostitutes who worked in brothels, were managed by pimps, or sold themselves on the streets. The rapid improvisation of Jews in the ghetto led to new populations engaging in the sex trade. As Katarzyna Person notes of the Warsaw ghetto, “with time prewar street prostitutes were being gradually replaced by middle-class girls and women who, especially as a result of the absence of male wage earners in their families, were increasingly finding themselves at the bottom of the ghetto hierarchy.”⁶⁵ The Oyneg Shabes Archive preserves the story of one young woman who turned to prostitution. Mrs. G., newly married a week before the war, was separated from her husband, who fled to the East. To support herself, she became a smuggler and a waitress. Eventually, she moved from being a waitress to a prostitute at a club to earn enough to support herself and her family. The Warsaw ghetto chronicler recording her story noted, “Now Mrs. G. makes erotic proposals to clients over a glass of vodka and she never fails to mention money. At the price of selling her body she is able to materially survive ... with her family.”⁶⁶

Hunger and Productivity

Hunger and starvation experienced by the Jews of the ghetto seriously impaired their ability to labor as these conditions led to weakness, illness, or death. Even if one’s work was inadequate, for many ghetto dwellers, it provided a means to obtain food, whether that was through payment for work, food at the place of employment, or an opportunity to obtain food. Many jobs, especially those in factories that served the Germans, provided supplemental meals during working hours.

As a result of the poor food situation, people often fell ill from work and missed days or were exhausted and came to work late. To combat this problem, supplemental rations for workers were sometimes made contingent on attendance at work. As one Łódź ghetto diarist noted, “The ration is available to everyone who was at work on July 1, the others can’t get it! So for example, someone who was absent on July 1, but got back to work on July 2, won’t receive the ration!”⁶⁷ Those workers who did not receive supplemental rations could find themselves in a deadly situation. Oskar Singer described a Dr. Edgar Fels, a fifty-year-old lawyer from Hamburg and a former officer in the army: “One day he came to work late and his boss deprived him of his soup ration as a punishment.”⁶⁸ Dr. Fels was never able to recover his strength after being deprived of his soup ration. He took to bed and died of hunger.

Adam Czerniaków, the head of the Warsaw ghetto, often tried to persuade the German ghetto administration of the need to pay workers sufficiently for their survival. He noted in his diary a conversation: "Auerswald maintains that a worker should labor at extracting bricks from the ruins all day for a bowl of soup. I remarked that he could also have a wife and children. Auerswald retorted that two bowls of soup might be made available."⁶⁹ The quote both highlights the German's belief that workers would do heavy labor in exchange for food and demonstrates a lack of understanding about the energy requirements of engaging in such labor as well as the possibility of feeding one's family as well as oneself.

In the Łódź ghetto, Rumkowski had workers cycle from their normal jobs to work in bakeries, where they could eat more and recover a bit from starvation. One survivor recalled a woman on such a temporary assignment: "In one bakery, there was a factory girl on temporary reassignment as a bookkeeper. It was a three month, rotating assignment to allow a factory worker to recoup a little bit."⁷⁰ Sometimes workers devised their own techniques for coping with hunger. A shoemaker and his son each received a soup at work for lunch. They shared one of the soups they received at work and saved the second soup to split for dinner.⁷¹

From Ghetto to Labor Camp

In all three ghettos, 1942 was a turning point during which mass deportations took the nonworking Jews to their deaths, leaving those engaged in production for the Germans and some support structures from the Judenrat to feed and police those who remained. In the Łódź ghetto, in an effort to save individuals from deportation, Rumkowski tried to place them in factory jobs. He instituted training workshops to teach the young factory skills. At one point, in June 1942, Biebow complained, "the Elder of the Jews has begun to sabotage the work systematically by removing good skilled workers from the factories ... and replacing them with children aged eight to fourteen who, of course, cannot do what is needed."⁷² After the mass deportations of nonworking Jews, the Łódź ghetto essentially became a labor camp. Even the few children left in the ghetto lived in an orphanage, with a sign reading "Home for the Young Worker."⁷³ This occurred at a time when labor needs for the Reich became acute. Nazi policy reflected this need. For example, by April 1943, the labor needs of the Reich had become severe enough that Aktion 14f13 (a murder campaign in concentration camps) was ordered to limit its killings to those prisoners who were actually insane.⁷⁴ Nazi food policy also reflected this need to preserve the

Table 9.1 *Daily food for workers and nonworkers in the Łódź ghetto*⁷⁵

	October 30, 1940	October 30, 1940	April 2, 1942	April 2, 1942	December 15, 1943
	Workers	Nonworkers	Workers	Nonworkers	Workers
Horsemeat	50 g	35.71 g	36 g	23 g	35.7 g
Fat	14.29 g	7.14 g	14 g	14 g	21.43
Sugar	21.43 g	10 g	32 g	3 g	32.14 g

labor force (see Table 9.1). Michal Unger, in her article, “The Status and Plight of Women in the Łódź Ghetto,” noted a decrease in mortality in 1943 that she attributed to a “slight improvement in nutrition.”⁷⁶

In Kraków, two deportations took place during 1942: June, which took away a large number of nonworking Jews, and October. After the second deportation, the Kraków ghetto was divided into the working (Ghetto A) and nonworking (Ghetto B) populations. The ranks of the unemployed grew when Jews in bad shape from small neighboring towns arrived without adequate clothing or material goods.⁷⁷ Ghetto B was already largely populated by poor people with nothing to live on, even before these Jews from the surrounding areas were added. Many from Ghetto B begged for food from the people in Ghetto A, across the barbed-wire fence. The Jews in Ghetto B were forbidden to leave their homes, but they were driven by hunger to seek food anyway. Eventually, the ghetto police nailed shut the doors and windows of their buildings so they could not get out. Food had to be brought in. According to Tadeusz Pankiewicz, “the OD [ghetto police] fed them like wild animals in cages. They lunged for the food and swallowed whole chunks without chewing; a second later, there wasn’t a single crumb left.”⁷⁸ In the end, the unemployed of the ghetto were deported to their deaths in Belzec, while those in Ghetto A were marched off to Płaszów labor camp.

In Warsaw, the great deportation of July to September 1942 resulted in the bulk of the nonworking population and many individuals considered to be nonessential workers being sent to their deaths. The rump remnant was essentially a labor camp. The Warsaw ghetto was transformed into a space where Jews engaged in production for the Nazis for most of the day.

Conclusion

Amartya Sen’s entitlement theory notes various forms of entitlement bundles. In the ghettos, labor was one of the most central items that

could be traded for food. Nazi policy required Jews to work but did not always provide remuneration or sufficient compensation to allow one to eat well enough to do the labor. Some jobs that did provide enough resources for food did not protect against deportation. Individuals and households used various employment strategies to meet their needs for adequate food and protection. This might mean switching between jobs, engaging social networks to obtain employment, or having a single household member obtain excess food. It was not only individuals and households that were tasked with balancing the needs of providing labor to the Germans and feeding working and nonworking ghetto inhabitants. Jewish leadership in the ghettos also used multiple techniques to balance this problem. Ultimately, however, the Germans took control of food out of the hands of the communal leadership in order to prioritize labor.