Warsaw Ghetto, October 1941

There you stand: in front of every house there’s already a crush of pushcarts with fruit and vegetables, and little stands with foodstuffs. These food stands are minuscule: an old Jewish woman has placed a few small bags of meal on a little stool or table, weighing two or three kilos each, with corn meal, brown bread, and *bona* (the flour that bakers receive from the Occupation authorities to bake the daily allotment of bread). Or groats, millet, or barley. No other kinds of food, such as beans or flour or dried preserves, are typically found on the little tables, such as might be seen in the stores. The prices here, of course, are a bit cheaper in comparison with other streets – after all, it’s Koźla Alley! – but they’re still high enough for a large portion of Warsaw Jews, whom the ghetto has robbed of the chance to make a living, and left with dangling, empty hands, with only one chance to sustain a meager existence: selling off their clothes and household items in the Wołówka, the flea market.

Rickshaws are the major mode of transport – that unique way of getting around in the Warsaw ghetto that the Jews, those cosmopolitans, never shy to adapt what they need from anyplace whatsoever, took from the Japanese and Chinese. The rickshaw was a great help to Koźla Alley, and not because droshkies and wagons have disappeared since the Germans confiscated the horses of Jewish drivers: that would not have been so bad. The Jewish porter in Warsaw can, believe me, carry a healthy sack of flour on his back. But what’s the use if he can’t do it in broad daylight? For the eye of the informer is always on the lookout. With the rickshaw, however, it’s a different game. Jews have modified and perfected the design beyond the wildest dreams of the Chinese. Behind the seat is an empty space where you can hide a few packets of flour, and make yourself comfortable on the plush seat like nobody’s business: and make as if you’re just taking a little jaunt into the alley.

But not everyone who gets food from Koźla Alley transports it in a rickshaw. Most go on foot, and these are in fact the mainstay of Koźla – the middlemen, together with their agents, the “strollers.” Since they can’t afford transportation, their rickshaws are their own backs, on which it’s not unusual for them to load three or four sacks of flour, groats, or other foodstuffs at a time. A sack usually weighs fifty kilos, but still, Jacob sets forth.

Nighttime smuggling provides the smugglers’ shops with plenty of everything: vegetables and fruit, groceries, meat, chicken, honey, and whatever the heart desires. Even with good drink. The city needs to eat in the morning, and the strollers need a whole day for their work. In the summer at five in the morning you can already see them hauling bags of food or a sack of potatoes and cans of milk. With their fresh faces, washed by the morning light, enlivened by their ardor, these are working Jews who can eat their fill, whose steps move with a feeling of confidence and power – amid the surrounding crowd of swollen feet.

Koźla Alley has several even-numbered houses, inhabited by Christians, but the entrances to the houses and doors have been walled up. Their entrances are now on the other side of the wall, on Freta Street, meaning outside the ghetto, with only a few windows of several apartments looking out to the ghetto. This layout is indeed a blessing, not just for the few goyim who live in these homes, but for the Jews as well, and, let’s be clear, not just for the Jews of Koźla Alley and its smugglers, but for all of Israel in Warsaw. For no matter how dirty the smuggling business finally is – a noose hung around the neck of the swollen and varicose consumer – given the horrific conditions of the great prison into which the Jews have been driven by the ghetto walls, smuggling is the only salvation left for the survivors, that saving remnant. And who knows: maybe someday we will have to erect a memorial to the smuggler whose courage, in retrospect, saved a good part of Jewish Warsaw from starving to death...

On the outside, the windows of the Christian houses are covered with wire grates from top to bottom. At first glance, or so it seems, the gratings were meant to keep the goyishe home separate from the Jewish street, but in fact, the wire bars are a good way to carry out the smuggling. From the inside, the goy places a kind of wooden chute, like you would
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مواد, גבעות, אוקטובר, 1941.

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 Works smuggle food from the “Aryan” side of Warsaw into the Ghetto.

Photo from Pinkes Varshe, Buenos Aires, 1955.
Peretz Opoczynski’s reportage places us in a small alley, bordering the ghetto wall in the Warsaw of October 1941. With its description of Jewish street-types and their Polish cohorts on the other side of the walls, “Smuggling in the Warsaw Ghetto” was written as part of the underground archive headed by Emmanuel Ringelblum, associated with the Jewish Self-Help, an extraordinary network of social services funded by the Joint Distribution Committee. Sneaking food across the ghetto wall, Opoczynski’s text reminds us, was part and parcel of resistance to the Holocaust in a situation of forced starvation, and his on-the-spot reportage anything but an elite activity. By describing the struggles of common Jews to bring food into the ghetto, writers like Opoczynski, and his counterpart Joseph Želkowski in Łódź, used the artful resources of Yiddish language to bridge the gap between “literature” and “history” and to reach people in the most extreme circumstances imaginable. Buried in a milk can as part of the Ringelblum archive, this text and its underground treasure would be unearthed after the war, aptly symbolizing the Jewish will to survive that manifested itself in the ghetto revolt of 1943. “Smuggling” in this reportage thus means bringing food into the ghetto, but also suggests the mission of carrying a vision of everyday Jewish life and language – as a force in its own right – into the future as well.

Shortened here, Opoczynski’s full description of “Smuggling in the Warsaw Ghetto” brims with earthy, sometimes dangerous Jewish characters, like the rural Jewish tough-guys of Sholem Asch’s “Kola Street” or the urban Jewish life of Łódź, made popular in Yisroel Rabon’s The Street (Di Gas) between the wars. Colorful figures people Kozła Alley in the Warsaw ghetto, using every ounce of their strength and imagination: Zelig the Paw, Colorful figures people Kozła Alley in the Warsaw ghetto, using every ounce of their strength and imagination: Zelig the Paw, and the sack is full, and Meir Bomke, the tall porter with shoulders like a real Hercules, slaps the sack onto his back as if it were light as a feather, and disappears with it as he must.

Cereal, millet, sugar, and other foods are smuggled in the same way. Only flour is smuggled in paper bags, and of course, not through the grated windows but through the windows of the upper floors. From the heights the Christian smuggler lowers a rope down to the street: there the Jewish smuggler ties paper bags onto the rope. The Christian pulls up the bags and fills them with flour, then lowers the individual bags, where they are snatched up and carried off. So as not to burn his hands, the Christian wears a pair of thick cotton gloves for the rope to slide through.

When the time comes to lower the merchandise, the windows of the ground-floor apartments are thronged. The smugglers’ wives, sons, daughters, and porters are all milling about, talking with the Christians...but the only people who are allowed to purchase merchandise are those authorized by the smuggler himself.

Goods fly from hand to hand, and the smuggled items are whisked away. A heave here, a pull there, then a yank, and the merchandise has been stowed away in the dark, half-closed storerooms of Kozła Alley’s medieval buildings. Broad-shouldered, red-cheeked wives with called hands look nervously about, shooting a glance to the corner of the alley at Franciszkaska to see if the coast is clear, or if someone is riding or walking by, when suddenly a hoarse warning shriek pierces the air:

“Pesach.”

“Pesach!” – the call is heard on all sides, and every door is whisked away. A heave here, a pull there, then a yank, and the merchandise has been stowed away in the dark, half-closed storerooms of Kozła Alley’s medieval buildings. Broad-shouldered, red-cheeked wives with called hands look nervously about, shooting a glance to the corner of the alley at Franciszkaska to see if the coast is clear, or if someone is riding or walking by, when suddenly a hoarse warning shriek pierces the air:

“Pesach.”

Because it’s Passover. A goy carrying a briefcase has come by. No one knows who he is, but he’s probably an undercover agent, so they wait. And when the goy upstairs gets tired of waiting and has the audacity to lower the rope again, crying out to the Jews standing below, “Nie ma już pejsach!” – “Pesach is finished” – they shoot back a warning, with the contemptuous look of the expert: “Czekaj, pejsach kręci!” – “Hold your horses, Pesach is still going on.”

Around seven – and elsewhere it’s much earlier – Christians deliver milk to Kozła Alley. Large tin cans, marked with the number of liters they can hold, are placed up against the windows of the ground-floor apartments. A thick tube with a measuring gauge is passed through the wire grate, and with a turn of the faucet – a gushing white stream of whole milk pours out, still carrying the aroma of the cow stall, quickly filling the can: and is moved even more quickly from the windows to the stores, where Jewish milkmen and milkwomen are waiting with containers to take it where people live.

Just yesterday was quite an occasion; as a good piece of business was being enjoyed by all concerned, the German police unexpectedly arrived at night – different police, not the...
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Opoczynski’s own history was part of that Yiddish tradition. Born to an observant family in Lutomiersk in 1892, two miles from Łódź, Peretz Opoczynski entered yeshiva at age 10 and was composing Hebrew poems by age 12. He grew up in a home in which his traditional father would read a Hebrew translation of Alexander Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, recounting the tale to the family in Yiddish. Like many in his generation, Opoczynski was drawn leftward by both Yiddish literature and Zionism. After serving in the Russian Army in WW I and spending several years in prison in Hungary, he emerged radicalized and modern in his politics, but with his Jewish national and linguistic sensibilities intact. Acquiring shoemaking as a trade, he became a Yiddish journalist. After marrying and moving to Warsaw, he wrote for the *Poale Zion Left* newspaper, sponsored by the pro-Yiddish Zionist party; he died in the ghetto of typhus on an unknown date in 1942 or 1943. Before the war, the family lived in the poorest neighborhoods, as Opoczynski honed his journalistic skills producing reportage of Jewish urban life, making use of his Jewish learning to depict the creative struggle of Jews caught between the traditional and modern worlds.

Opoczynski’s other reportage from the ghetto shows him full of doubt whether Jewish Europe, and especially its Yiddish readers, would in fact survive. He wrote for them nonetheless. Opoczynski’s descriptions of popular Jewish slang in this piece – like “Passover,” the alert to smugglers that the Germans are coming – are intended to support underground and everyday Jews, dispel their illusions about what was to come, and strengthen the collective will to live. The famous revolt that broke out in Warsaw rooted itself in this spirit, though few Yiddish readers in Warsaw were ever able to read Opoczynski’s prose before it entered the milk can. His descriptions of smuggling across the ghetto wall in this sense look forward to our post-Holocaust era: today, they cross a different boundary and can shatter many of our own illusions about how Jewish life, rather than death, on the vibrant streets of Warsaw in 1941, actually looked, tasted, and felt.

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ones who’d been paid off – and put on quite a show. They seized tens of thousands worth in food, and it cost another fortune in cash just to stop the losses there. No more than three of the “customs officials” fell from the heights in all the confusion and were killed on the spot. Well, what can you do? They live by the border fees they charge, and die by them too.

There are Jewish and goyishe customs officials. The goyim smuggle the merchandise which Christians buy, and sell to the Jewish street. The Jewish ones transfer the goods to the Jewish smugglers on the other side. In the process the border people keep track: how many tons of foodstuffs are passed through, and for every kilo weight a certain percentage goes to them. The officials have their men who keep a close eye on all transactions, to make sure no one shorts them what they’re due.

These customs officials have it tough: the nonstop standing on the roof means they’re continually risking their lives. But what won’t a Jew do to earn his bread? Koźla Alley provides thousands of Jews with a living. The barrowmen live from Koźla Alley carting off its fruit and vegetables on their little wagons, and the porters make a living from them as well. A few porters are always hanging about next to every large smuggler’s shop, to grab up every bag of flour that hits the ground, sacks of grain and other staples, and take them where they belong. Aside from their normal charges, the porters have made new demands, and now require an additional package fee for every bag of food that passes through Koźla Alley.

Next to Franciszkańska Street stands Zelig the Paw, a short, stolid type wearing a shiny peasant’s visor at a rakish angle, on the lookout for anyone with a package: “Stop!” he hisses through his teeth: “Don’t be shy, Pops, hand over a fifty for your postage due.”

“I owe a fifty?” the Jew passing by replies, trying to play dumb.

“That’s right, a fifty, and hand it over quick.”

He gives in, and it’s a good thing too, for if he didn’t, Zelig would lay him out with a paw right to the face, hard enough to knock him silly. Reasons are useless against that kind of argument, so he whimperes and pays.

Around twelve noon, Koźla Alley comes to a halt. All supplies of smuggled foodstuffs have already been sold, the porters are sitting on the little front steps of the stores, the smugglers take a break on the tables in the empty stores, and Koźla Alley rests, preparing itself for the afternoon’s smuggling, which begins at four or five in the afternoon.

You never know whether you’ll be paying the same prices in the afternoon as in the morning: that can only be determined when new supplies are lowered through the window. From the spirits of the first smuggler, who carries his sacks of flour, and from the porters and customs officials, the whole Alley can sense a change in the going price, and just as a sudden wind moves across a grain field on a hot summer’s day, the murmur passes through the alley: “Prices are up!”

It’s not just the barrowmen, the porters, the strollers, the milk-Jews and customs officials who depend on Koźla Alley for their living: thousands of small food shops are partially dependent on it, and naturally raise their prices, and last but not least, 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 Koźla Alley had not served as their storehouse.

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