

[Paszko on Ferenc, "Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie": Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie'](#)

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Maria Ferenc. *"Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie": Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie.* Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2021. 528 pp. 49,00 PLN (paper), ISBN 978-83-66485-48-8.

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The subject of everyday life in occupied Warsaw has been extensively explored in numerous studies and monographs. Despite the challenges of bringing new, innovative findings and projects to the study of Second World War history, Polish sociologist Maria Ferenc's book introduces a fresh perspective on the topic of communication and information flow in the Warsaw Ghetto. As the events of the last year have shown, despite its setting in the Second World War time frame, understanding the circulation of information and the generation of fake news remains relevant today.

Ferenc analyzes the circulation of information in the Warsaw Ghetto from the outbreak of war until the end of the largest liquidation of the Jewish quarter in September 1942: the Grossaktion Warsaw (the months that followed the "Great Action," up until the outbreak of the uprising in April 1943, are described in the epilogue). The author raises questions about the sources of information circulating in the ghetto and their social dimension. To answer queries related to the sociocultural aspects of ghetto life, Ferenc uses sociological theories and situates her research in the spectrum of the social sciences rather than in one particular methodology. Based on theories of biographical sociology, she builds narratives about the social, agglomerated dimension of interpersonal interactions. The events that took place in the occupied country were the counterpoint to the reality of the micro-world seemingly enclosed within the walls of the ghetto. The capital received alarming news of the first murders of Jews and the scale of the early extermination. Underground organizations, as depositories of eyewitness reports, acted as powerful and important information agencies.

Ferenc takes up the topic of the circulation of information in a holistic way and does not limit her research to using the sources left by the institutionalized groups and the contemporary press. She investigates the distribution and reception of information by the "ordinary" Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw, clustered over time in the small area of the ghetto. Ferenc's multifaceted, fast-paced narrative introduces other important information agencies, including the Polish residents of Warsaw as well as the administration of the ghetto. In this way, Ferenc offers not a dry description of the widely discussed topics of rumors and news from the perspective of the media but, instead, a universal study of cultural history that can reach a wider audience.

Within the prevailing polyphony, the information infrastructure was sufficiently crowded to

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accommodate individual interpretations of incoming news. Using both personal accounts and diaristic descriptions, Ferenc's detailed narrative creates somewhat of an illusion of the first-person experience, in which daily communication and thus oral contact as well as irrational expectations of reality (or wishful thinking), enriched by rumors and recurring jokes, play a significant part.

Ferenc investigates the circulation of incoming news and information in the Warsaw Ghetto in a chronological manner, which allows for parallel observation of the changes taking place in the occupied country and the ongoing deportations. The question of the occupier's policy is a crucial element, as successive decrees imposed by German authorities set the trajectory of social interaction and the activities of underground groups. Apart from the time frame, the main pillars of the narrative are the following aspects: the nature of incoming news (optimistic or pessimistic), the information environment (underground groups, "ordinary" Jews), and the threefold division of incoming news (the course of the war, the fate of Jews within and outside the Warsaw Ghetto, and the situation of non-Jewish Poles) (p. 32). Using a wealth of contemporaneous sources—mostly from the collections of the Emanuel Ringelblum Archive (the underground activities of the Oneg Shabbat group) and supplemented by ego-documents, that is, memoirs and interviews published after the war—Ferenc combines and complements press sources with memoir narratives, which not only makes the message more verifiable but also adds multidimensionality.

While the book's first chapters describe the situation at the beginning of the war and the extermination from a somewhat distant and diffuse perspective, chapter 6 "zooms in" and narrows the research horizon to the issue of the incoming news of the extermination of Jews in Vilna, Belzec, and Chelmno nad Nerem, among other communities, to the Jewish underground. Here, the pace of the narrative slows down as Ferenc follows the journeys of pieces of information and eyewitness testimonies from more rural locations to Warsaw. For those familiar with the history of the Holocaust, this chapter introduces a kind of suspense, as "black clouds" gather over the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto (p. 408). Ferenc devotes a great deal of space to liaisons within underground structures, such as Oneg Shabbat, a resistance group that monitored the dissemination of messages into the information bloodstream. Further insights into events taking place not far from Warsaw, including the development of labor camp infrastructure in Treblinka and the proceeding deportations and mass killings of Jews in the Treblinka killing center, help to trace the trajectory of the impending Holocaust and the fate of the Warsaw Ghetto inhabitants outlined in the epilogue.

Chapter 7 deals with the degree of knowledge and awareness that the "average ghetto inhabitant" had of mass exterminations outside of Warsaw. In this part of the book, the author returns to rumors and news repeated on the streets about the terror in other towns in the General Government. An interesting context for the study of the circulation of so-called information from below is the reactions to that disseminated news. As Ferenc mentions, many Jews did not want to believe that the extermination of such a large number of people was planned. The author interprets the disbelief and distance as a self-defensive reaction against fear, seeded by the accounts of surviving witnesses. Her theoretical tool kit is drawn from scholarship in the history of emotions and psychological studies. She interprets, for instance, the atmosphere of the ghetto and its inhabitants' reactions to incoming (and often tragic) news by focusing on behavioral patterns, conceptions of time and temporality, and psychological distance or denial.

Closing chapter 7, Ferenc examines the culmination of the information situation in the Warsaw

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Ghetto before and during the great liquidation action, which began in July 1942. Here, the author divides the narrative into pessimistic and (relatively) optimistic reactions to the displacement as a way to "control" the information chaos, although the limited availability of sources means that she is only able to create a superficially coherent picture. Ferenc explains that people reacted to the news primarily with disbelief, often displaying a lack of rational thinking that merged "fantasy with reality." As she writes, "the concept of annihilation was beyond perception's capability for the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto"(p. 238).

An indisputable advantage of Ferenc's book is the careful selection of secondary literature. The author does not artificially theorize or complicate the picture by referring to a large body of literature that may be only marginally relevant to the discussed topic. Still, Ferenc's engagement with Polish-Jewish relationships is gentle (although she does emphasize that the aim of the publication is not to analyze Polish-Jewish relations, which have already been addressed many times by Holocaust scholars, but rather to explore issues concerning the state of knowledge on political topics and the progress of the extermination).

What is more, Ferenc does not treat the Warsaw Ghetto as an individual entity, existing outside the context of the "outside world." Rather, she argues that the Jewish ghetto—located partly in the city center—marked the presence of Jews in the city, becoming "a synecdoche of the entire Jewish community" (p. 120). Jews received information from outside the ghetto and participated in the circulation of information about, for example, the course of the war. News from the fronts corresponded closely with incoming information about the extermination of Jewish communities in the small towns of the General Government. Positive news of military action pushed back the specter of calamity and reinforced expectations of a rapid end to the war. Thus, not only did groups of people form communication networks, but so did the incoming news. Further, she highlights that, in the case of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, there was no "epistemological breakthrough." Rather, the knowledge of the impending extermination "was seeping out" slowly during the period preceding the Grossaktion Warsaw (p. 15). The process of learning about the Holocaust was dynamic, she argues, akin to "reconstructing a picture from many scattered parts" (pp. 434-35).

Ferenc's book is an important contribution to Holocaust studies and research on the everyday life under the National Socialist regime. In contrast to the well-developed literature on the circulation of information about the extermination of the Jews in the "outside world," the topic of the circulation of information within the Jewish community still remains on the periphery of academic research interests. Ferenc's book fits into the field of the cultural history of the Holocaust, which goes beyond the framework of the individual experience of the Shoah and poses the question of the symbolic, socially shared dimension of wartime everyday life. In narrative structure and tone, the book will surely be successful in reaching a wide audience beyond historians and academic scholars.

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