Eternal topic of ghetto street conversation is food, for which there is a never-ending search. Children like these are the worst sufferers under the starvation rationing system enforced by the Germans.

A ghetto policeman on duty. The Gestapo set up a Jewish police force, gave it no arms, but did give it responsibility without authority. It does the best it can to maintain order among starving people.

One morning we woke up to find a number of Jews lying dead in Kupiecka Street. They had been caught outside the wall. The Germans had shot them down where they found them and then thrown the bodies into the ghetto. We never knew what business they had been engaged on or whether they had passes or not. The Germans were not troubled by little technicalities like that; they shot first and didn't bother to ask questions after.

There is an old prison, ironically the only place where non-Jews were allowed to live in the ghetto and share the air polluted by the Jews. The German aptitude for thoroughness in everything had made that prison a sinister place not only inside but all around it. In all adjoining houses every window had to be kept closed and locked, every shade permanently drawn. The people living there were condemned to be without light or air. They were forced to burn candles all day, to breathe the same foul air day after day, and were in reality worse off than the prisoners themselves.

One afternoon a woman in one of those houses on Inozielna Street, opened the French windows that led to a balcony and stepped out into the open. She may have momentarily forgotten the order. The craving for a breath of fresh air may have suddenly become overpowering. Or perhaps she was suddenly taken ill and needed help. We never knew, and nobody ever will know, because the moment she appeared she was shot to death.

For our own sake and the sake of our families, we were terrified at any harm that might befall our jailers, because lightning reprisals would always strike at us. Day by day we saw friends and relatives murdered in retaliation for deeds in which they had no share, of which they had no knowledge. On one occasion a Polish policeman had been killed on duty. The Gestapo carried out an extensive search, in the course of which one building, at Nalewki 9, put up a stubborn resistance for several hours. When the defenders were finally overcome, fifty-three male inhabitants of that building were dragged out and summarily shot.
1942—fifty Jewish policemen who spoke German were ordered to report to the Gestapo. Nobody knew what had happened, and everybody was terrified of what would happen. There is one incident during that night’s raid of which I have firsthand knowledge and which will serve to illustrate what went on all over the ghetto. Two heavily armed Gestapo men in uniform ordered a young Jewish policeman, hardly more than a boy, to take them to the house of a certain Mr. Blajman who lived on Dzika Street. He was a baker, respected and well liked. The family and guests were just sitting down for the Sabbath meal, when the police arrived. Curtly, Mr. Blajman was told to come with them. His wife, in an agony of fear, pleaded with them to let him finish his dinner. "Don’t worry,” said one of the Germans, "you’ll have him back very soon.”

"You’d better give him his overcoat and a muffler; it’s cold outside," laughed the other.

The Jewish police boy looked white as a ghost and was trembling all over. The others in the family were all standing like statues, looking desperately from the Gestapo men to Mr. Blajman, who was quietly putting on his overcoat and not saying a word. He went to his wife and embraced her, then disengaged himself and stepped out into the night with the others.

The German had spoken the truth. Not more than five minutes had gone by when Blajman was brought back. But this time he was dead. The four men had walked through the pitch-dark streets. After several corners had been turned, Blajman was ordered to step out in front. One German flashed his light quickly, and in the same instant the other put a bullet through the baker’s back.

Many more were hunted up that night and killed. We never learned the reason. That winter of 1941-42 was extremely severe. There had not been such low temperatures for many years—and we in eastern Europe are accustomed to cold. Fuel was scarce and terribly expensive. A ton of coal cost 3,000 zloty, more than $500. Wood was wet and refused to kindle. Nearly all of it went to make coffins, for the death rate was going steadily up day by day. To conserve the precious warmth, we opened our windows less and less as the weather grew colder. The smell and the smoke in our overcrowded quarters made us sick, but letting in air meant freezing to death.

Furs for the Germans

In December we had a cruel blow when Commissar Auerswaldt ordered us to give up all furs we possessed by the twenty-sixth of that month. Every scrap of fur to be seized; all fur-lined and even fur-trimmed garments had to go, because it was not permitted to rip off the fur and keep the cloth. On the twenty-sixth, a bitterly cold day with a howling wind, we stood in line before the council building and waited our turn to hand over the only protection we had against the murderous season. The members of the council were the most tragic of all, for they had to inflict this new hardship on their own people, as executioners for the enemy.

As 1941 drew to an end, our long suffering began to tell on us. Our resistance was waning, for we never at any time had enough to eat. You cannot permanently feed a community of 600,000 people on the black market. It was impossible for the haphazard business of smuggling entirely to replace the regular channels of supplying a city with food under normal conditions. What came in was always far too little, and even that quantity grew less as the German net became tighter. With the increase in risk, the smugglers got bolder and more unscrupulous. Substitute products began to displace the genuine articles, while prices went sky-high.

There were many kinds of hunger in the ghetto. There were tens of thousands of families who could not afford black-market prices and had to depend on the rationed goods for sustenance. Slow victims of undernourishment, these. Their teeth decayed and fell out, their hair and nails refused to grow, their eyes became great sunken hollows in fleshless faces, and their stomachs were repulsively bloated. And, finally, there were many who had exhausted their funds entirely. These miserable travesties of human beings picked up what they could find in the streets and in garbage piles, consuming the rest of their strength in the awful fight against real starvation.

Disease and epidemic found an easy harvest. Tuberculosis took an increasingly heavy toll. Worst of all, spotted fever broke out and raged uncontrolled for months. Thousands upon thousands perished from this devastating plague, which played havoc with the conditions of filth and overcrowding in the ghetto.

The Threat of Plagues

It drained away the strength of our already overworked and weakened doctors and nurses. Our feeble medical resources were hopelessly unprepared to cope with its ravages. There were no hospitals in which to isolate the cases, no adequate means of disinfecting buildings. Cleanliness was impossible, and there was absolutely nothing to prevent the plague from spreading. We could only hope and pray that by some miracle it would pass us by.

Toward the end of that year we learned that there were people who had reached a degree of suffering even worse...
BEHIND THE WALL
(Life — and death — in Warsaw’s Ghetto)

By Tosha Bialer

The author, her husband and son are the only persons ever known to have escaped from the Black Age revival of the ghetto set up by Germany in Warsaw. In grimly factual narrative she tells the tragic story of Poland’s Jews as they suffer and die behind the Wall that has become a new world symbol of German barbarism.

The first thing we felt when the Polish war came to an end was overwhelming relief from aerial bombing. Only those who have been through air raids with no shelter to hide in will know what we felt. Gradually our men came home from the fighting—those who had escaped death or capture. Many people who had fled eastward during the campaign flocked back with some assurance that life would go on more or less as before.

There was little anxiety among the Jews in Warsaw. Naturally there would be the privations of war to contend with—hunger and cold and perhaps even disease; and then, for us as well as for our Christian compatriots, there was the deep humiliation at having been defeated and overrun by another people. As Jews, we did not expect more than that. The fate of the Jews in Germany should have warned us.

A few weeks after the end of the war, the Gestapo swarmed in and began their work of destruction.

They very soon made their intentions clear. Toward the end of 1939 all Jews were ordered to wear the yellow arm band, and all Jewish stores to display a discriminating label. In certain streets with preponderantly Jewish population, posters were put up: “Infested Area!” “Beware! Thoroughfare Only!” This — as it was meant to — was an open invitation to all sorts of violence and plunder.

The lawless elements of the city took full advantage of the opportunity to loot shops and private houses, break windows, and beat up persons wearing the stigmatizing arm band, encouraged at every point by officials of the secret police and led by the Storm Troopers who had accompanied the latter into the city. Searching for hidden arms was one of the most common excuses for the Gestapo to break into homes and commit any kind of outrage. On one such occasion my brother-in-law was arrested and dragged away in the middle of the night, and we never saw him again. Besides his wife, he left a little boy of six.

In March, 1940, Jews under forty were called up for compulsory labor. Many fled from the country, many more were able to evade the order with bribes or by hiding. But a great number were seized and sent away. Only one man returned to Warsaw to tell the story of that expedition. The labor conscripts were taken to the Russian front and there put to work leveling ground for airfields and roads, working chest-deep in ice-cold water for days. The food was scant, and the accommodations were so flimsy they gave little or no shelter against the Russian winter. Many died from exposure and exhaustion. None of this group was ever heard of again.

Early in 1940 we were puzzled to see gangs of workmen engaged in constructing what seemed to be parts of a wall in various sections of the city. The strange thing was that these parts did not appear to belong to any recognizable pattern but were scattered all over. Many guesses were made, and the general conclusion was that the wall was a strategic meas-

In the picture above are a few of the 600,000 Jews (the entire Jewish population of Warsaw) that the German conquerors have segregated in one of the most infamous ghettos in history. They have gathered in one of the better ghetto streets to listen to loud-speaker announcements and orders from the Gestapo.

A street vendor sells the yellow arm bands that all Jews in Poland have been required to wear since 1939, and must wear today even in their sealed and guarded ghetto.

Below: The Germans made it as difficult as possible for the population of the ghetto to move around even within their own section. The street here is inside the walls but is completely closed off, and the bridge may be closed without notice.
To prevent snatching, bread is sold from a locked cage. It is made of adulterated flour, and the bread allowance is five pounds per person each month. Note scantiness of woman’s dress under coat.

To prevent snatching, bread is sold from a locked cage. It is made of adulterated flour, and the bread allowance is five pounds per person each month. Note scantiness of woman’s dress under coat.
The Overlord of the Ghetto

The administration, sketchy at the start, had to be set up in a hurry or we could not have lived even through the first weeks. The council was to conduct all dealings with the outer world, which for us had shrunk into one figure, was incorporated in one man: Auerswald. This was our overlord, the Commisar for Jews in the German government. I never saw him and know few who did. He was a remote personality, but his shadow fell darkly across our lives. His office had complete charge of any question connected with Jews, and his assistants went in and out of the Jewish Council’s office, issuing orders, shouting at our officials, pounding on the table and demanding that every prescription had to be submitted to the commissar through the Jewish Council. The needs of the sick were thus deliberately delayed by red tape and by every means which the Germans showed great skill in systematically blocking traffic at this crossroad.

All banks and exchange offices were outside the ghetto. Any financial business had to be conducted through the Jewish Council to receive what the Germans granted—and they were by no means all.

A Jewish post office was organized. The Germans showed great skill in systematically blocking traffic at this crossroad. Jewish post office was organized. The streets were always jammed full of pedestrians, so that one had literally to fight one’s way through the masses. The Germans had laid out the ghetto with the idea of making it as difficult as possible for us to get anywhere. The worst congestion of all was at the point I mentioned before, where the two sections of the ghetto met at a sharp angle at the corner of Zelasna and Chlodna. This was a point all of us had to pass many times a week because the Jewish Council was situated in the little ghetto. The Germans showed great skill in systematically blocking traffic at this crossroad. A Jewish post office was organized with two branches, one in each section of the ghetto. These would handle nothing but post cards. No letters, parcels, or anything else could be sent out of or into the ghetto. Every card was examined by the German censor.

Persecuting the Sick

One of the worst hardships we had to bear was the fact that all pharmacies had been moved out of the ghetto and that every prescription had to be submitted to the commissar through the Jewish Council. The needs of the sick were thus deliberately delayed by red tape. Furthermore, we were obliged to pay for this red tape; every prescription granted—and they were by no means all—carried a special handling fee in addition to its cost. To make up for the loss of our hospital, we adapted several small houses to take in sick people. These would handle nothing but prescriptions. No letters, parcels, or anything else could be sent out of or into the ghetto. Every card was examined by the German censor.

The most vital problem for us was food. During those long months the word on every person’s lips, the thought in every mind, was food—where to get it, how much was there. For food a man would take the most fearful risks, would incur the most frightful punishments. Because nothing could be grown in the ghetto, every bit of food had to be brought in from the outside. An Office of Provisions was set up within the Jewish Council to receive what the Germans allotted to us and distribute it to the re-
Our official bread ration was five pounds a month per person. Enough flour for this was delivered to the council, which then apportioned it to the bakers. The flour was dark and sticky, while the bread made from it tasted like turnips and was indigestible.

The diet forced upon us was calculated to starve us. It contained no fats, no eggs, no meat or fish, no fruits or vegetables, and was, therefore, almost completely lacking in calories and vitamins. Naturally, in these circumstances we took matters into our own hands. A flourishing black market sprang up, supplying by highly organized smuggling, and this enabled us to keep from starving to death.

The smugglers were tough characters, reckless and unafraid. The penalty if caught was death, but there were always replacements to be found for their depleted ranks. Well organized and disciplined, they worked on a large scale. Moreover, the smugglers were fortunate in two respects: food was plentiful in the country around the capital, and they were able to sell, were all dedicated to that supreme purpose.

The majority of the ghetto population lived on a monstrous and unprecedented sell-out. We consumed whatever substance was left. Those who still had money spent it. By far the greater part had nothing but the valuables they had been able to carry away with them. These we sold one by one so that we could eat. There were always Germans and German sympathizers who jumped at the chance to buy objets d'art, precious stones and the like, for a pittance. The agents who brought about these deals lived entirely on their commissions, which they used to buy food. They had to have helpers to smuggle the valuables out of the ghetto, for the wall was a barrier both ways.

Exploits of Young Smugglers

Small children were trained for this trade. They would creep through holes in the brickwork or climb over and jump down. Once on the outside they would run away on their errands. They made marvelous smugglers, for they could be taught easily and it was the sort of game their imaginations would seize upon with delight. They loved to outwit the sluggish Germans and were thoroughly familiar with every winding street and back alley through which they sped with their burdens. They were seldom caught, because children under fourteen did not have to wear the Jewish arm band.

Those who had no valuables left sold their last miserable belongings out on the sidewalks before their lodgings or hawked them through the streets. When these were gone, they sold their miserable bodies, their last strength, to menial services for a meal, for a piece of food. And those who had no more strength, died.

The second part of this article will appear next week.