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The Hunger Letters

Between the Lack and Excess of Memory

Abstract

After examining thousands of letters written between 1940 and 1944 by Polish Jews in ghettos on the verge of starvation, the author approached a visual artist to assist with processing the emotional aspect of the letters. The goal was to reflect the voices of their senders and addressees. Between October 2008 and spring 2010, two sample letters, reproduced from originals in the archive, were sent together with an explanatory letter to 3,000 randomly selected Varsovians. The Hunger Letters Project, the 'letter in a bottle', had repercussions that exceeded all expectations. Finally, the specific understanding of this public intervention is elaborated upon in the context of its ethnographic results.

In his book *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach describes practices that make it possible to imaginatively recreate, revive, and reinvent the past.¹ Discussing such events as delayed burials and sacrifices made for the dead, auctions of old objects and funeral parades, the author examines the recollection process course processes of substitution or surrogacy that Atlantic cultures use to fill the void left by the dead, the expelled and the lost. A culture that has survived disaster recreates itself in that process. "Those who had survived use substitutes to fill the loss caused by death and expulsion."² Performance, which he defines as personifying or transmitting something hitherto absent, proves a significant notion for Roach. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the object being performed had in fact previously lived. "To perform also, however oftentimes secretly, means to reinvent."³ The motivations behind our project, which I discuss below, include a number of assumptions Roach makes in his book, including the claim that identities have a chance to survive only in relation to the present. The historical anthropologist should spend more time in the street than in the archives, as the street proves the best at remembering the dead; performance constitutes the main memory topoi, and it is only through the bodies of the living that the dead can speak freely.⁴

In 2008, I spent a number of weeks examining thousands of letters written by Polish Jews who were starving and confined in ghettos throughout Poland in the years between 1940 and 1944. The letters were addressed to Jewish organisations in the West, in particular to Joint,⁵ which had its headquarters in neutral Switzerland. They contained appeals for help and testimony of substantial food aid they had already received. The packages I looked through contained some thousands of receipts for delivered products – sugar, cocoa, powdered milk, marmalade, sprats, flour, Ovomaltine – interspersed with laconic information about the fate of respective

1 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. Circum – Atlantic Performance, New York 1996, XI.

2 Roach, *Cities of the Dead* 2.

3 Ibid., XI.

4 Ibid., XII-XIII.

5 See photographic documentation of some aspects of this help in the album Linda Levi (ed.), *I Live. Send Help*, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York 2014.

addressees. “In January Dorka and Bronisław stayed in the Sandomierz ghetto. [...] Aunt Krysia and Andzia had left with the transport and we have not heard from them ever since. We love you.”⁶ Prepared in such a way that they passed through German postal censorship, the letters often represented a coded answer to questions posed by the Jews’ anxious relatives. Reading deeper into the multitude of these letters, a number of individual, recurring voices emerge. Gradually, over the course of time, more and more of these voices fall silent.

Overwhelmed by the size of this archive (which remains unpublished to this day) I approached Artur Żmijewski, a visual artist associated with the Foksal Gallery Foundation,⁷ and asked him for advice on how to process the emotional load of the letters in a way that would resemble the voices of their senders and addressees. This marked the beginning of the *Hunger Letters* project. If classified using Alfredo Jaar’s terminology, the project might fall into the category of public intervention.⁸ At the end of this article, I elaborate on my understanding of the intervention in the context of its ethnographic results.

We have selected two letters from the archives housed at the Jewish Historical Institute and reproduced them in the appendix to this article.⁹ Anna Najmanowiczowa authored the first letter, which was written in 1940 and addressed to the Central Welfare Council.¹⁰ The second letter, addressed to the Central Committee of the Jewish Social Self-Help, was written by Motel Pszenica, a journalist who had been displaced from Warsaw and was now wandering about the Lublin Province.¹¹ Left destitute with no money whatsoever, both authors requested help for themselves and their starving families.¹²

We wrote and signed an accompanying note of explanation. In October 2008 and the spring of 2010, we attached it to both letters and sent them to 3,000 random Varsovians. The Polish Post provided us with addresses. The mailing covered, among other places, Warsaw districts such as Muranów (site of a former ghetto) and parts of Wola, Żoliborz, and Saska Kępa.¹³

The letter explaining our intentions reads as follows:

“Dear Madam, Dear Sir,

Confined in the ghettos throughout Europe in the years 1940–1944, the Jews were starving. They sent letters to welfare institutions as well as their families asking for material help, food and whatever work possible. However, which European Jews possessed anything beyond the elements that made up their bodies: fat, hair, bones, golden caps on their teeth? Later on they were also deprived of these possessions.

6 I would like to thank Paula Sawicka for the opportunity to look into the above unpublished fonds.

7 See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artur_Żmijewski_\(filmmaker\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artur_Żmijewski_(filmmaker)), (16 April 2016).

8 Dłaczego Alfredo Jaar podpalił muzeum sztuki współczesnej [Why Alfredo Jaar set fire to the museum of contemporary art], an interview with Alfredo Jaar by Aleksandra Lipczak, http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,96856,17293061,Dłaczego_Alfredo_Jaar_podpalił_muzeum_sztuki_wspolczesnej_.html, (17 March 2015).

9 I would like to thank Karolina Panz, who ran a search query on our behalf in the Jewish Historical Institute and selected the letters we sent out.

10 Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. Najmanowiczowie 1-2, AŻIH-ŻSS 211-36, 10-11.

11 Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, AŻIH-ŻSS 211-31, 49. According to the letter, Motel Pszenica published the novel *Pajin* in Yiddish before the war. Unfortunately, consultations with Yiddish philologists did not help me to find the novel yet.

12 For letters by Anna Najmanowiczowa and Motel Pszenica, see appendix.

13 A letter by Artur Żmijewski to the author of the present text, 24 March 2015: “When it comes to financing, we bought stamps, while volunteers helped us to pack and send out the letters. We packed the letters and stamped them in 2 sessions. During the first session we were helped by humanities students and during the second one by students of the Academy of Fine Arts. This was a home-based work performed at our own expense.”

The Jewish letters asking for food are still kept in the archives. This is precisely because they are letters and applications, the aim of which is to do their pleading job by circulating among people.

Madam/Sir, today it is you who are the addressee of such a Jewish letter – coming back to life after sixty years of crying for help. What is your response to this plea, this Jewish application?

We ask you to give us your answer and your remarks. Madam/Sir, how do you feel being the addressee of a letter authored by a sender who most likely died a long time ago?

Please place your answer in the envelope attached to this letter and drop it in your mailbox or send it by e-mail to: [our e-mail address]

Kind regards,

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (cultural anthropologist, University of Warsaw)

Artur Żmijewski (filmmaker)”



The ‘letter in a bottle’ shown above had repercussions that exceeded our expectations. We received answers from nearly every third addressee. Some letters showed traces of domestic life; one had been lying on a kitchen table for quite some time.¹⁴ The letters were often written by elderly people who were not used to writing¹⁵ and sometimes visually impaired,¹⁶ which makes it all the more amazing that they decided to write back. Many approved of the project and expressed their gratitude to the organisers. Critical feedback of the *Hunger Letters* came mostly from respondents with excellent writing skills,¹⁷ though some addressees, who might be less skilled at writing, simply sent us letters torn to pieces.

Our intervention received an extraordinary response in the media. Articles on the *Hunger Letters* appeared in all the major newspapers¹⁸ and we were approached

¹⁴ Letter 30.

¹⁵ Letter 29: “Back in those years I was a child. I feel so sorry for the Jews and the Poles and all the people in the world. I feel sorry for those, who died and are still dying of starvation and exhaustion all over the world” [signature illegible].

¹⁶ Letter 32.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Dystynkcja. Społeczna krytyka władzy sądzenia*, transl. P. Biłos, Warsaw 2005, 221, footnote 5: “Townsppeople are distinct for their ability to control the situation of the survey (this is an ability that any results analysis should take into consideration).” [Title of English translation of the French original: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*].

¹⁸ See, e.g. Tomasz Urzykowski, *Krązą listy z getta* [Circulating a List of the Ghetto], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 5 December 2008.

by several other periodicals including the military monthly *Polska Zbrojna*. Interviewed by the newspapers in question, Jan Oldakowski, Director of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, expressed anxiety over possible harm the intervention may have caused, while a representative of the Polish Jewish Youth Organisation shared his fears that the intervention would trigger anti-Jewish resentments.¹⁹ Scholars, on the other hand, praised us for the innovative form we chose to examine the Jewish letters.²⁰

Below, I refer to reactions to our letter, grouping them into six categories:

1. Ambivalence,
2. There are more important things,
3. This is an important issue, but ...,
4. Not only Jews suffered,
5. I feel,
6. I remember.

Statistically speaking, the responses (330 letters) to our letter are represented by the following figures. Ambivalence (Category 1: 162 letters – 98 torn to pieces, 64 empty envelopes) proved the group with the largest number of responses, while the combined categories 2, 3, and 4 made up the second largest group (28; 45; 27). The third largest group consisted of letters falling into the ‘I feel’ category (Category 5: 70 letters), while the type of response we encountered least often were those from the category ‘I remember’ (Category 6 – five letters).²¹

In the summary below, I refer to respondents by name using signatures found on the letters, having assumed that if respondents did not wish them to be disclosed, then the letters would have contained an appropriate provision. What I omitted were confessions pertaining to the respondent’s personal life. With the exception of letters torn to pieces – all of which were sent anonymously – most answers were signed with a full name and surname, and many contained a return address. A very small number of respondents signed the letters with their initials or signed them illegibly.

Ambivalence

I will begin with an attempt to unravel the attitudes behind the most ambiguous answers. I would be grateful for any suggestions on how to better understand those that resist interpretation.

Regardless of whether our correspondents praised or rebuked us, their reaction proved strong enough to convince them to drop the letters into a mailbox. Even if the envelopes we received contained copies of our letter torn to pieces (this was the content of approximately 100 letters received, a number that amounts to a little less than 30 per cent of all responses), our intervention must have made an impression, as it motivated our respondents to act. Rather than simply throw the letter away, they had

19 Anna Brzezińska, *Wołają o pomoc po latach* [After Years, They Cry for Help], in: *Życie Warszawy*, 4 December 2008, Jan Oldakowski: “There is a risk that while meaning to evoke a sense of emotional commitment, we may accidentally trigger indifference not towards the problem itself, but to the form of the action.”

20 Marcin Zarzecki, sociologist from the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw: “This is a well thought-out socio-anthropological study. The study has a cognitive character not only for the investigators, but also for all the participants. The authors of the study apparently want to cause a shock. Judging by the reaction to the letter, one can see to what extent do declare values such as tolerance or empathy, and to what extent we implement them”, *ibid*.

21 The categories sometimes overlapped, while the classification relates to the motive that prevails in a given letter. The above figures represent only rough approximates and are by no means representative.

to remember them and find a mailbox. Tearing a letter to pieces is a gesture of rejection. One can only guess at the emotion behind a gesture like this. Irritation? Indignation? Were these people driven by anger at us disturbing their peace and reminding them of something that should not be recalled, in a form that does not meet their idea of communication? Did their anger result from the fact that, once again, we were speaking about Jews? This is something we do not know.

Letters containing a blank sheet of paper constituted the second largest category of ambivalent responses. What the gesture of putting a blank sheet into an envelope means remains a disputable issue. We do not know if the sender was unable to find words to describe what he or she had read, and how it had made them feel, or if it was meant to express that the authors of this letter were stupid, and that the letter was a waste of the recipients' time. I am inclined to view this gesture as conscious silence rather than criticism. In any case, the sheets were blank, even though they did not have to be. They did not contain signatures or words that could have been offensive, nor were they scribbled on, as it sometimes proves easier to draw something rather than write it. This might not be an indication of rejection so much as restraint. While the sender establishes contact with the addressee, he or she is either mistrustful or does not find the words to articulate what they feel.

In one case, we received a letter with content that bordered on two of the categories mentioned above. While our letter had been torn to pieces, the letter written by Mrs Najmanowiczowa was left intact. Enclosed with her letter was a sheet of paper showing a cross drawn with a pen.²²



While the letter above differentiates between various types of texts intended to be destroyed (as we received some torn to pieces), it alerts us to yet another dimension of the non-verbal answer. Tearing a letter to pieces – especially a *Hunger Letter* – and returning it to the sender is a symbolically loaded gesture. The charge could have something to do with “defacement”²³ as Michael Taussig describes it in the following: “When the human body, national flag, money or a monument is destroyed, an odd surplus of negative energy is activated inside the object being destroyed.”²⁴ I assume

²² Letter 13.

²³ The English verb deface means: 1. to mar the surface or appearance of; disfigure e.g. – to deface a wall by writing on it; 2. to efface, obliterate, or injure the surface of, as to make illegible or invalid e.g. to deface a bond, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/defacement>, (22 March 2015).

²⁴ “When the human body, a nation’s flag, money, or a public figure is defaced, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself”, Michael Taussig, *Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford 1999, 1.

that a *Hunger Letter* could be listed among the examples Taussig gives here. Perhaps the addressee sensed precisely this kind of energy, and it stopped them from tearing up Mrs Najmanowiczowa's appeal? However, the same kind of energy was certainly disregarded by those who decided to shred her letter after all.

The thought mentioned above allows us to understand the gesture of sending an empty sheet back to the sender even better. Sending both the sheet of paper and the appeal authored by one of the starving Jews back to the sender and agreeing that the Jewish letter stays with the addressee are two different things.

Category: There are Other, More Important Things

"Dear professor, this and similar issues should be of more interest to you, shouldn't they?" – writes SK, who sends brochures for the Polish Children's Aid Foundation Maciuś together with two beautiful postcards with floral ornaments, signed: "Kind regards."²⁵ The author of this response politely draws our attention to something she (or he) believes to be more deserving than the *Hunger Letters*.

A similar response came from Wiesława Zakrzewska. "Dear Sir and Madam," she writes:

"Please think about why you are asking other people what they feel when they read the letter [...] 60 years after the war. Why do you chase the ghosts of the past? [...] Life is short and it's such a pity to waste it on senseless and pointless conversations. I don't know what the purpose of all this is. I wouldn't like the things I write to eat up our energy."²⁶

Further on in her response, we see the following written in capital letters: "THIS IS A SELF-IMMOLATION WITH NO PURPOSE IT WOULD BE WORTHY OF." Still, having said all this (and just as we expected) Mrs Zakrzewska shares the feelings our letter evoked in her:

"Reading the letter you sent me, a letter which is more than 60 years old, I would like the human being to be strong enough to push away the sorrow. I would like people to be free. I would like them to see themselves and others as a sacredness you must neither destroy, nor hurt."²⁷

Mrs Zakrzewska's letter is typical of this category, as it contains a struggle between the desire to express a negative opinion about our intervention and the wish to take part in it and share her feelings.

Kazimiera Pełka is also torn. She writes that "she feels sorry for this sick and abandoned human being"²⁸ and that the letter makes her feel guilty even though she was just two years old in 1940. However, right after these words, she expresses her scepticism about our intervention. "It's easy to be outraged or moved. What is much more difficult is to put yourself to test: share your last slice of bread or risk your own life for another human being." Kazimiera Pełka admits that she usually does not turn down those in need. For example now, "perhaps influenced by your letter", she decided to send out a Christmas package and to support Maciuś, a charity foundation supporting children. "But that's not what it is all about!" She ends her letter in a way we find rather surprising. Still, this is something we wanted to achieve.

²⁵ Letter 4.

²⁶ All the quotes from the letters adapted in their original form, have been corrected only if the correction made them more legible.

²⁷ Letter 1.

²⁸ Letter 22.

Another response that falls into the same category as Kazimiera Pełka's letter is the one authored by the "Poor Pensioner" from Warsaw. She admits that it is a good thing to "investigate into the past. However, what proves even better is to investigate into the harm being done today to old people, whose pensions are low and who do not have enough money to buy medicine and make a living." The author of this letter calls "the war started by Hitler [...] the greatest crime". However, she also writes about other wars and mentions "Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan". She does not have a high opinion of people who pursue politics everywhere and calls them "hyenas", who "run around wherever they can make their pile or have their hands in the till no matter whether it's in the government, in the parliament, in Brussels or in the Church". Such people "plunder everything we managed to build in the poverty after World War II". What follows is a better identification of the feelings and views our letter evoked in the author. "I recalled, above all, the poor years of my childhood and youth and the harms made by those in power, in particular by Jews, who have always ruled us and still rule us."²⁹ The only politicians the Poor Pensioner calls "Great Poles" and finds worthy of being role models were Wojciech Jaruzelski and Edward Gierek.

Category: This is an Important Issue, But ...

Addressees such as Edyta Pasek-Paskowska, a Master's degree holder in ethnography who (we came to find out) had dealt with "the deportees, prisoners of the Pawiak prison and those imprisoned and tortured in the Gestapo headquarters in Szucha Avenue, prisoners of concentration camps", would be willing to "conditionally accept" the issue we touched upon. She would gladly answer our questions, but only if we specified: "1. the aim of the action, 2. the form of the action (a reliable questionnaire or brief opinion poll), 3. the character of the action (scholarly, popular-scientific, artistic), 4. the topic of the study [...], 5. the author of the project [...], 6. the sponsor of the action." She writes that it is all the more difficult for her to participate in the project, since "the letter covering [our] action is marked by a specific kind of emotionality, which results in statements with an affective undertone. Still, only 25 per cent of human nature is made up by emotions."³⁰

A letter from Halina Jaskólska, another addressee, presents a similar set of conditions before she would agree to take on our intervention topic. "What does an anthropologist need such confessions for?" she asks, irritated. She begins her letter by reproaching us and saying that since our letter contains neither a date nor a signature, it is not eligible for any kind of response.³¹ However, she unexpectedly gives us her answer after all:

"You ask me to answer a question concerning hunger. Hunger takes on a variety of faces. I was 14 when Warsaw was captured by Nazi troops [...]. For five years, I never had enough to eat and dreamed of a slice of buttered bread and wheat cake, some cold meats and a Frikadelle for dinner. [...] Another kind of hunger was suffered by thousands of men, women and children – Polish citizens of Jewish origins, cramped inside the Warsaw ghetto. I had an opportunity to witness that kind of hunger only once in my life. Al-

²⁹ Letter 5.

³⁰ Letter 9.

³¹ According to the author, this is the reason why "most of the residents of the house at Anielewicz Street 11; the building located at the intersection of former Gęsia Street" will not respond to our letter.

though years have passed by, the memory of that hunger has stayed with me ever since. Just like the clear memory of two Jewish children who risked their lives and got out of the ghetto to get some potatoes and white, stale bread.”³²

Category: Not Only Jews Suffered

A sizeable category of responses (17) is based on the incorrect assumption that our letter constitutes a reproach to the Central Welfare Council for not helping Mrs Najmanowiczowa. Some of our respondents were so anxious about the fact that the Central Welfare Council referred Mrs Najmanowiczowa’s case to Jewish Social Self-Help that they provided us with extensive justifications as to why the wartime help associations had to distinguish between aid to Polish citizens of Jewish and non-Jewish origin. The letter by Maria Tyszel, which is full of historical details and figures, certainly falls into this category. She writes, “we need to remember that the displacements that caused the loss of property, did not affect only Jews”. Next, she discusses in detail the circumstances within which the Central Welfare Council³³ had to function, quoting a variety of figures. Her conclusion reads as follows: “I do not think that in those circumstances the Central Welfare Council had the financial capabilities to compensate any requests addressed” at her and “the Jewish Social Self-Aid would be a better addressee of [our] letter”.³⁴

Another letter from Mikołaj Wróblewski also falls into this category. While he was “deeply touched” by the archival materials we sent, he also accused our letter of being “biased”.

“I wonder why you emphasise only the suffering of Jews? Were there no other nations that suffered, were starving and dying? My grandfather and two of my uncles, as well as hundreds of other people were murdered by the Germans in 1941 in the Eastern Borderlands. Do they not deserve our memory? Why are they not talked about? Isn’t it because they were not Jews?”

The letter ends with an appeal to the organisers to seek “some basic balance in evaluating history”.³⁵

A letter sent from the same address on Anielewicz Street – this time by Mrs M. Grabowska – also asks for “balance in evaluating history”, although her appeal is a different one. She was born towards the end of the war and has no memories of her own. Nevertheless, she wants to participate in our intervention. “I belong to the lost generation. The poverty I grew up in and my family lived in after the war certainly does not compare to the atrocities inflicted upon the Jewish nation.”³⁶

The author of yet another letter from the discussed category is a nurse.³⁷ Like other addressees, she also stands up for the citizens of all other the countries in Europe

³² Letter 11.

³³ The Central Welfare Council was a Polish self-aid organization established during the First World War I in the Kingdom of Poland, active in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The organization ran dormitories, shelters, day-care centres and orphanages, distributed food, clothes and cash support and recorded wartime losses. In the years 1940–1945, the organisation was reactivated by Adam Roniker and functioned by the permission of governor Hans Frank. Apart from the funds acquired from the occupational authorities, the organisation was also supported by the government of the United States and Polish government in exile. See Bogdan Kroll, *Rada Główna Opiekuńcza 1939–1945 [The Welfare Council, 1939–1945]*, Warsaw 1985.

³⁴ Letter 2.

³⁵ Letter 18.

³⁶ Letter 21.

³⁷ Letter 26.

affected by the war. “I respect the Jewish nation, maybe even more than other nations (obviously except for my own nation).” Nevertheless, the author goes on to describe the disappointment she experienced during a trip to the Holy Land:

“A centuries old culture, tradition and architecture. The paradise land and (I will not hesitate to say it) is the land of RACISM AND GHETTOS. Walls and walls everywhere. Walls guarded by soldiers armed with rifles ready to fire any minute. [...] All my ideas about Jews were ruined.”³⁸

An anonymous letter from this category uses a similar type of argumentation. First it suggests that Jews were not the only group that was deported and robbed, nor was it the only one that was starving. Next, the author defends the Central Welfare Council’s right to help only non-Jewish Poles: “Is there any sense in sending out this appeal and emphasising in a drastic way what the bodies of the Jews consisted of? Is this a provocation?”³⁹

Another letter notes: “This was a cruel time. We all suffered.”⁴⁰

A visually impaired person, author of another anonymous letter, writes:

“In the times of the occupation, my family was expelled from a large farm, just like the Jews were. When I was in a concentration camp and in prison as a 14-year-old girl, I shared my slice of bread with Jewish girls. I cannot imagine a distinction between a Jew and a Pole. I distinguish only between a good and a bad human being. [...] I cannot imagine not to share what I have with those who are confined behind barbed wires in the ghetto.”⁴¹

The last letter I would like to mention in this category was written by Ms Maria, surname unknown. It begins with a typical confession: “Reading your letter, I was surprised, since the Poles believe that Jews keep (and have always kept) gold and jewellery in the event of disaster.”⁴²

What is striking here is that of all the answers we received, only a scarce number refer to issues connected to faith. Except for the drawing of a cross and a letter to be discussed later on in the present text, these references appeared in only two cases: in a letter written by a Protestant woman, a member of the Salvation Army,⁴³ and an anonymous letter authored by a relative of one of the Righteous Among the Nations. Strangely enough, it was the latter response that was marked by resentment:

“A long time ago, not in a galaxy far away but here on Earth, a Roman said ‘Behold the man’ [...] and these words were addressed to a Jew. The Jew was a man special in the history of mankind. Providence burdened him accusations much greater than that of being hungry (and he hungered for humanity). He could not cry for help to the Jewish Social Self-Aid, since to some extent it was this organisation that sentenced him to be crucified!”⁴⁴

38 The war waged by the state of Israel and the unjust treatment of Palestinians are also mentioned in the letter by Tadeusz Cegiełka, letter 35.

39 Letter 27.

40 Letter 33.

41 Letter 30.

42 Letter 25.

43 Letter 24: “War is an evil the human being inflicts upon another human being. Jesus did not teach us to hate. Those who wrote about that, are already in a better world and see us from heaven above. [...] As a member of the Church, I signed a paper obliging me to fight against evil and Satan.”

44 Letter 36.

Category: I Feel

A sizeable (70) category of letters consists of spontaneous and sensitive statements made by people who felt touched by what they read. “After reading your letter I felt sadness and remorse”, writes Krzysztof Frydrych:

“I also felt embarrassed that, compared to the life of that man, my life is safe and free of such disasters. Maybe that was even shame? [...] So you can view this letter as being up-to-date. There will always be people among us who are in need and we should listen closely to their needs.”⁴⁵

“When I was reading the ‘hunger letter’ I had received, I pictured the man who was seriously ill and had a six-year-old daughter and wife to support. He himself was helpless and asked for help”, writes Marek Brzezicki, a mathematics student:

“Apart from sadness and compassion, this letter made me angry at the people who perpetrated this situation. [...] If I had the opportunity to help people in those times, I certainly would have done it. However, I do not really know for a fact. [...] I hope I would have helped them, but I am not sure. Similar situations are taking place these days as well, even here in Warsaw. But do I do something? I don’t think so. What use are these few zlotys I gave the beggar or those I dropped into the moneybox in the church?”⁴⁶

Sławomir Kowalczyk writes that our letter made him “incredibly emotional”,⁴⁷ though in a slightly different way. The first part of his text is devoted to the reasons why the Germans started the war (answer: “This had been in their blood since the Teutonic times.”), while another compares the Nazis to Soviet soldiers and concludes that the latter were even worse (“they were like a barbaric swarm from the East”). The comparison ends with: “if a there is no tight grip and wise governance in a nation, such a nation becomes barbaric.” Further on, the letter is devoted to the Poles among the Righteous Among the Nations, who sacrificed their lives to save Jews. “I’m proud to be Polish”, writes Mr Sławomir, comparing his fellow countrymen favourably to the Czechs, who he views as cowardly and who did not want to fight Hitler.

Mr Marcin Buczek is 28 years old and has always been interested in history and the past.⁴⁸ He does not like the fact that the history of the Polish Jews is now being viewed only through the perspective of the Shoah.

“Why do young Jews on their trips to Poland get to know this country only through concentration camps, monuments, and suffering? [...] Keeping the suffering of Jews in memory is important, however there is a thin line you cannot cross. Behind this line, you are bombarded with the Holocaust by the media and become insensitive to suffering [...] and compassion turns to boredom.”

Mr Buczek feels sorry reading our letter, because although he would like to help, he cannot.

A letter from Oskar Cichocki shows one example of unconditional acceptance of our intervention. He writes that while he is too young to elaborate on the topic, he would like to share his experience. He practices combat sports, especially those connected with Krav Maga, the Israeli combat and self-defence system. He does not like the stereotypes he observes in society. The prejudice he is referring to concern so-called *dresiarze* – a subculture of young Polish males who wear tracksuits and are

45 Letter 3.

46 Letter 14.

47 Letter 10.

48 Letter 17.

usually portrayed as being undereducated, unemployed, aggressive, and anti-social. This stereotype is all the more painful for him as he often wears tracksuits just to feel comfortable. The author recalls another first-hand experience of other prejudices. When he was putting up posters inviting people to visit Krav Maga trainings, he was sometimes approached by people (he stresses that these were only older and very elderly people) who said, “You are putting up Jewish posters”, “I hate Jews”, or asking him: “Why are you putting up their posters? Are you a Jew yourself?”⁴⁹ “I’m very surprised by this kind of behaviour”, Oskar Cichocki writes:

“I don’t like the country I live in, because so many ridiculous stereotypes prevail here. I was touched by the description I read in your letter. I would never like to find myself in a situation like that [...] the only thing I know is that sometimes you can only count on yourself. I learned that sometimes you can get [more] help from a stranger than from people you grew up with. So what must it have been like back then?”

A different, powerful response to the *Hunger Letter* came from 35-year-old Sebastian Badurski, a printer from Warsaw. The letter below is a testament to how much some of the addressees opened up to our intervention, allowing us to understand it better:

“Although my generation didn’t experience the war, I have great respect for the people who lived in those tragic times. [...] Reading the appeal made by the Najmanowicz family, I saw in my mind’s eye an image of the ghetto I know from the movies. I saw people buried while they were still alive, who were sentenced for their origins. [...] While reading your letter, I felt such a great compassion in my heart for that family. [...] What drew my attention were the words: ‘humble plea’ [...]. I don’t know if this is the reaction you expected, but my answer to your question is: yes. I help the Najmanowicz family.”⁵⁰

Ms Marta M., addressed her letter directly to Motel Pszenica:

“Dear Man! I have read your letter with great attention. I think I can help you by giving your wife a job. This will provide you with financial support to cover the costs of your medical treatment and allow your daughter to start her preschool education. I realise that it is difficult for you to ask others for help and that you’d rather die were it not for your family, but it’s your God, not you, who decides about this. He made you humble. Send your wife to work for me and I will give her decent food and a decent pay.”⁵¹

Ms Grażyna understood our action in a similar way. She addressed her letter directly to the senders: “Dear Mr and Mrs Najmanowicz. In response to your letter, we will try our best to provide you with material support in order to compensate for at least a little of your losses and pain. We will do our best to allow you to live with the dignity that befits every human being.” What follows is a letter addressed to the organisers of the intervention, answering our questions: “What do I feel? I feel pain and compassion for all the people who were deprived of everything. [...] How would I feel [...] if I were deprived of everything, robbed by my ‘brothers’, seeking help and justice in vain?”

An author who signed his or her letter with an ‘E’, wrote:

49 Letter 6.

50 Letter 15.

51 Letter 38.

“60 years have passed, and the letter is still touching and shocking. What remains is grief, sadness, and deep compassion. The letter is like a travel journal. This man was sick and completely helpless, moved from one place to another. [...] Any kind of help was hardly probable. I felt what an ordinary human being would feel. I have lots of empathy and compassion for him and his loved ones. I also feel helpless.”

What comes next is the following reflection:

“But this had been done by the Germans [...]. They drew all disasters on Europe, they perfectly implemented the annihilation of the Jewish nation [...] and let nobody say we are anti-Semites. This is not that generation!!! They don't burn synagogues here, they do it in France, Germany, Switzerland. [...] The Jews? They were rightful Polish citizens. Poland was also their motherland. [...] Nearly two decades ago, my little daughter attended preschool. One day, a group of old Jews from Israel came to Warsaw [...], the children and their teachers organised a concert. [...] When they were singing ‘Flow, Vistula Flow through the Polish Land’ [...] you could hear a great sob in the hall. These were our Polish-Jews crying. [...] They lived through horrible things here and still managed to miraculously survive! [...] They are no strangers to us, they are our compatriots. [...] The damage done to culture is indescribable. What we missed are diversity and Polish Jews. I'm sorry.”⁵²

Category: I Remember

Two letters stand out in the category ‘I remember’. The first one was written by Mr Miżyński, who was born in 1931 and lived in a house at Złota Street 8 together with both Catholic and a few Jewish families. He remembers the names of his neighbours, especially that of Adaś Centkier, a boy four years older than he was back then:

“Once the Jews had been confined in the ghetto, Adaś used to drop by in our place. He was terribly thin and wore tattered rags. This lasted until the ghetto was liquidated. I have no idea what happened to the people I knew. Wondering what would I feel reading (if I would receive such a letter from them), [I would answer with a question]: why did they have to die?”⁵³

The second letter was written by painter Jacek Sempoliński. I will quote the entire text:

“Dear Joanna,
When it comes to the ‘Jewish’ letter, I think exactly the same that all human beings do (except for non-human beings). I won't write you that extermination is one of the greatest adventures of our species. Unlike others, I know this from my own experience. When I stood in the Krasiński Square together with other Varsovians. You could see a sea of fire that began on the other side of the square and hear sounds also coming from that side. When I was ‘touring’ the street abandoned by Jews in what was once the ghetto (e.g. the ghetto in Leszno), I was walking through shreds of duvets, smashed furniture, in stench. Remnants of a poster put up on a broken window of one of the cafes read: ‘Diana Blumenfeld performs today.’

⁵² Letter 16.

⁵³ Letter 23.

I think to myself: ‘Well, well.’ Later on, I learned she was a famous actress. Then, after another sea of fire and stench, among the rubbles of the slain Warsaw, I saw the remnants of yet another poster with: Lutosławski and Panufnik. When it comes to the main topic, I think this is some shady issue. Historical explanations are not enough. Some kind of defect.

Anyway, if thinkers say that art penetrates unspoken areas, why can’t things look like this in the history of mankind? Interestingly enough, these inconceivable things do not relieve anybody from, but quite to the contrary force to ...”⁵⁴

Methodological commentary

In the ethnographic context, the method used in the study presented above can be classified as an “eliciting interview”,⁵⁵ wherein knowledge is acquired by presenting an artefact, text or photograph to the respondents to serve as a starting point for narration. This operation also aims to reduce respondents’ possible inclination to meet investigators’ expectations.

Consequently, the form our letter took was essential to the intervention’s success. The second paragraph of our letter alludes to Giorgio Agamben’s figure of “bare life”, which is to say “the fat, hair, bones, golden caps on their teeth” to which many European Jews were reduced during the Holocaust. The figure metonymically pointed to the register our survey concerns. However, we preferred not to name the register directly, as this would prevent us from receiving undisturbed associations, feelings, and evaluations. Our point was to verify whether the Shoah would be called as it should be (no, it was not, except for six letters),⁵⁶ whether we would encounter a rivalry between martyrologies (yes, we did in 27 cases), and whether we would meet with sympathy or antipathy towards the victims. The responses we received displayed all of the above options together with the infamous motif of Jewish gold, “Jews – exploiters, who rule us”, the motif of deicide, penal mythology containing speculations about the metaphysical causes of the Holocaust, the motif of unjust policy pursued by the state of Israel,⁵⁷ and unjust accusations of “Polish anti-Semitism”.⁵⁸ Our respondents also expressed how proud they were of actions taken by the Righteous Among the Nations, and emphasised the need to defend the rules the Central Welfare Council followed in distributing to non-Jewish Poles only, and in a few cases reminded us that helping Jews was punishable by death at that time.⁵⁹

We were astonished at the *Hunger Letter’s* ability to trigger such a rich cross-section of attitudes, anxieties, prejudices, and opinions, and in such a small and unrepresentative study. Regardless of how touching the contact was, it is hard not to notice that

54 Letter 34.

55 See, e.g. Wendy Hollway/Tony Jefferson, Eliciting Narrative Through the In-Depth Interview, in: *Qualitative Inquiry* 3 (March 1997) 1, 53-70.

56 Letter 20: “This is the evidence of the great tragedy of the Jewish nation, which suffered unimaginably in the years 1940–1945. The Germans used the most cruel of methods to annihilate this nation creating ghettos and death camps.”; letter 35: “I constantly feel how horrible was the suffering and debasement experienced by the Jewish nation during the Second World War in the years 1940–1944.”; letter 16: “they [the Germans] have perfectly implemented the extermination of the nation.”; letter 36: “The last world war [...] How much ink, film stock and paper were used to produce the reports and books by people, who had survived the Holocaust”; letter 21: “the poverty I grew up in [...] does not compare to the atrocities that came upon the Jewish nation. I quote the sixth letter, written by Jacek Sempoliński, in the part: “I remember”.

57 E.g. letter 35: “For many years [Israel] has been waging war against the Palestinians, taking their land, building walls and is becoming the aggressor, jeopardising world peace.”

58 Letters 16, 31, 18.

59 Np. list 25.

the most common reaction our correspondents gave to mention of Jewish hunger was something Pierre Bourdieu would call false universalisation,⁶⁰ which often has a noble motive.⁶¹ A typical response to our letter reads as follows: “I believe the difficulties of surviving the war and coping with hunger were connected less to nationality: Jewish or Polish, than to the environment you lived in and the situation created by the occupiers.”⁶² Only two people noted that ‘Polish’ and ‘Jewish’ hunger constituted two entirely different things, given the fact that the Jews were outlawed and forced to live in cramped ghettos.⁶³ Not learning the differences between both hungers could be called, to use J. L. Austin’s term, a “valid falsity”⁶⁴ reflecting many years of negligence when it comes to educating children about the Holocaust in Poland.⁶⁵ Contrary to the facts contained, for example in the response from the Central Welfare Council, which referred Mrs Najmowiczowa’s appeal to the Jewish Social Self-Aid, the respondents to our letter usually denied the hunger’s ‘ethnicity’ or its murderous uniqueness. Refusing to accept that hunger affected Jews in an exceptional way, they stubbornly insisted that their reactions were not triggered by their own particular interest: “having read this touching letter, I said I couldn’t stay indifferent. Indifferent to the fate of the human being and an Arab, Jew, or representative of any other particular nation.”⁶⁶

In the formal sense, a common feature of the responses received was that out of two possible senders, the correspondents chose to address their response to the anthropologist, and not the artist. This could be due to the fact that the anthropologist’s name was the only one written on the addressed envelope. Thus the person of the “professor”, to whom the response was addressed, became a valid screen for projecting and sharing knowledge; a screen showing expectations failed or fulfilled, praise, reprimands, opinions, and feelings.

In the technical sense, the cognitive mechanism of the *Hunger Letters* is based on the phenomena of transference and countertransference known from psychoanalysis.⁶⁷ The respondents were confronted with archival materials. Empathising with the situation of the starving Jews was the transference, while the reaction to the feeling of discomfort – sometimes violent and aggressive and sometimes patient and full of compassion – was the countertransference. The intervention’s first and most important aim was to begin this process, giving respondents a magnified space in which to express themselves. The point was to allow the past to ask the present a question and to consider the response received by the past.

60 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, transl. K.Wakar, Warsaw 2006, 94.

61 Letter 30: “I cannot imagine a distinction between a Jew and a Pole. I distinguish only between a good and a bad human.”

62 Letter 32.

63 Letters 11 and 21.

64 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 346: According to Austin, a fabrication or deceit made public to everybody as something that deserves universal respect, becomes a valid lie, which means that it is made familiar with and denied the name of the deceit, beginning with the deceiver himself. Here, Bourdieu refers readers to J.L.Austin’s book, *How to Do Things With Words*, [in:] idem, *Mówienie i poznawanie. Rozprawy i wykłady filozoficzne*, [Speaking and Learning. Hearing Philosophical Lectures] transl., ed. and introduction by B.Chwedeńczuk, PWN, Warsaw 1991 (Original Title: idem, *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lecture Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford 1962, http://pubman.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:2271128:3/component/escidoc:2271430/austin_1962_how-to-do-things-with-words.pdf, (22 March 2015).

65 The problems of school programs on Holocaust in Polish literature are referred to by Sylwia Karolak in her recently published, renowned book: *Doświadczenie Zagłady w literaturze polskiej 1947–1991. Kanon, który nie powstał* [The Experience of the Holocaust in Polish Literature, 1947–1991. A canon that never was], Poznań 2014.

66 Letter 37.

67 <http://www.psychodynamika.pl/index.php/page/materialy-szkoleniowe/2-przeciwprzeniesienie.html> (19 March 2015).

Joseph Roach, who I mention at the beginning of the present text, suggests that identities can survive only in processes of surrogacy in a constantly changing relationship with the present. Our intervention was an example of such a surrogacy, as it constituted a re-enactment of the Jewish cries for help, this time in a situation where providing help was not punished with death. Perhaps we owe the massive response to the *Hunger Letters* precisely to that re-enactment.⁶⁸ Faced with the uncertainty caused by the intervention's artistic inspiration and a sizeable per cent of ambivalent responses, it is difficult to provide an unambiguous interpretation of the received results. Even if we assume that the interpretation was an artistic metaphor, let us try to see it clearly: out of the 3,000 appeals sent out, 70 responses were empathetic, 98 letters were sent back in shreds, 64 responses were empty and 103 responses questioned the purpose of dealing with this subject.

The *Hunger Letters* allowed both the senders and the addressees to broaden their experience and gave them some food for thought. This in turn falls within Michel Foucault's definition of work as

“that which is susceptible of introducing a significant difference in the field of knowledge, at the cost of certain difficulty for the author and the reader, with, however, the eventual recompense of a certain pleasure, that is to say of access to another figure of truth.”⁶⁹

O d p i s 49

55 Do Motel Pszenica
Centralnego Komitetu Międzyrzec.
Żydowskiej Samopomocy Społecznej
w K r a k o w i e.

Niniejszym zwracam się z prośbą następującą :

Przed wojną zamieszkiwałem w Warszawie na ul. Konarskiego 3. Po wojnie przyjechałem do miasta rodzinnego Kadziń, ale tu mnie znowu wysiedlili do Słowatycze. Ze Słowatycze jechałem do Międzyrzec, w lecie pracowałem trochę przy krawiectwie oraz na robotę rolną. W jesieni tego roku odesłano mnie do obozu pracy w Lublinie. Tam zachorowałem na zapalenie nerek. Leżałem trzy tygodnie w Lublinie. wyszedłem ze szpitala 12.12. 1940 w stanie zapalnym, bo nie miałem pieniędzy do zapłacenia. Teraz leżę w domu w Międzyrzecu. Potrzebuję diety, lekarstwa i co tydzień analizy. A ja nawet i czarnego chleba nie mam. Mam żonę i 5-letnią córeczkę. Znajduję się w beznadziejnym stanie. Przed wojną wydałem książkę opowieść "Pajń", która miała ciepły oddźwięk. Dotychczas nie wyciągałem dłoni o pomoc, ale teraz jak zachorowałem i to ciężko, to zmuszony jestem. Ja wiem, że dużo ludzi, którzy się do Was zwracają wedle pomocy, nie potrzebują

Jestem autorem różnych reparażów, opowieści wydrukowanych w rozmaitych pismach na tle życia robotniczego i uprzejmie wzywam o rychłej pomocy, gdyż stoję przed przepaścią. Pracować nie mogę, potrzebuje leczenia i muszę patrzeć jak moje dziecko głoduje i żona. Jesteśmy bosi, bez opału i ja muszę leżeć w łóżku i patrzeć nad tym. Wolałbym śmierć, ale gdzie pójść dziecko i żona.

Apeluję do Was pospieszcie z pomocą, obiecuję, że jak wyzdrowieję, stanę do służby Waszej instytucji.

Z poważaniem

68 Eric L. Santner wrote about the purpose of similar re-enactments that allow us to re-approach lost cases in *Stranded Objects. Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, Ithaca and London 1990.

69 James D. Fabian (ed.), Michel Foucault, *Power*, (transl. Robert Hurley et al.), New York 2000.

Copy

Motel Pszenica

Międzyrzec

To: Central Committee of the Jewish Social Self-Aid in Kraków

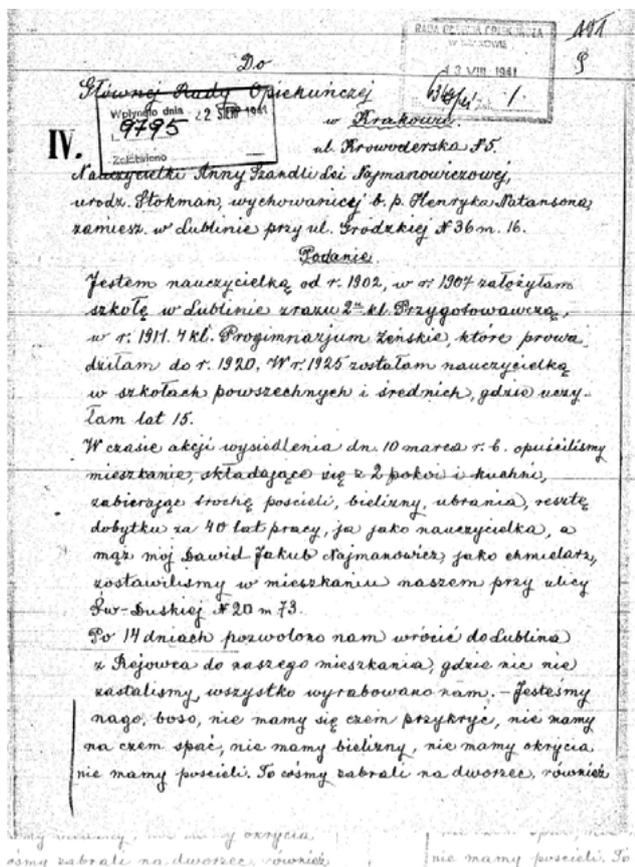
I hereby request what follows:

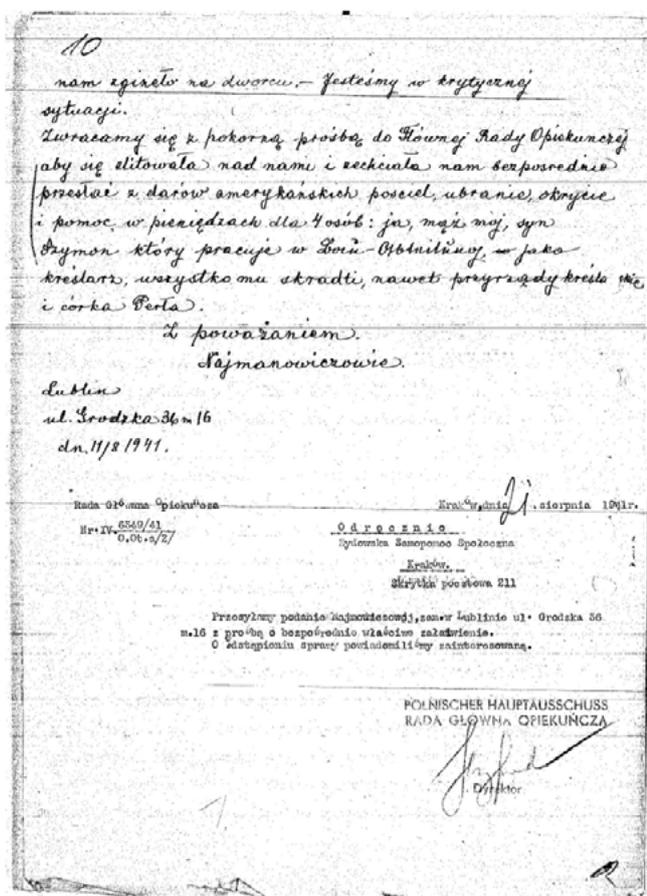
Before the war I lived in Warsaw at Konarskiego Street 3. After the war I came to my hometown Radzyń, but here I was deported again – to Słowatycze. Then I went from Słowatycze to Międzyrzec, and in the summer I worked a little bit in tailoring and then worked on a farm. This year in autumn, I was sent back to the labour camp in Lublin. There, I contracted nephritis. I spent three weeks in Lublin and left the hospital on 12.12.1940 with the nephritis uncured, because I had no money to pay for the medical treatment. Now I am lying in bed at home in Międzyrzec. I need a diet, medicine and a check-up each week. I have nothing, not even some black bread. I have a wife and 5-year-old daughter. My situation is hopeless. Before the war I published the book *Pajń*, which met with a warm reception. I have not asked for help so far, but now I am forced to do so, because I am seriously ill. I know that many people who ask you to help them according to their needs do not need that help at all.

I'm the author of several features, stories on the life of workers that have been printed in several papers. I kindly ask you to help me as soon as possible, because I'm on the brink of disaster. I cannot work, because I need medical treatment and have to watch as my wife and child suffer hunger. We are bare-footed and I have to lie in bed and watch all this. I would rather die, but where would my wife and child go?

I appeal to you, come to our aid. Once the war is over, I promise I will come to serve your institution.

Regards,





To: Central Welfare Council in Kraków
Krowoderska St.

Received: August 22nd

Settled:

Teacher Anna [illegible word] [illegible word] Najmanowiczowa, born Stokman, a pupil of Mr Henryk Natanson, residing at Grodzka Street 36/16.

Application

I have been a teacher since 1902, and in 1907 I established a two-grade preparatory school. In 1911, founded a four-grade preparatory junior high school for girls, which I ran until 1920. In 1925, I started to teach at common schools and high schools and worked there for 15 years.

During the displacement action, on 10 March, we left our flat, which consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. We managed to take some bedclothes, clothes and underwear, and had to leave behind the rest of our belongings – the fruit of 40 years of work – mine as a teacher and my husband Daniel Jakub Najmanowicz's work as a hop-grower in our flat at Św.Duska Street 20/73.

After 14 days spent in Rejowiec, we were allowed return to our apartment in Lublin. Upon our return, we did not find a thing. We had been robbed of everything. We are naked, barefoot and have nothing to cover ourselves with. We have nowhere to sleep. We have no underwear, no cover, nor bedclothes. We had even lost the things we took to the train station. We are in a critical situation.

We humbly ask the Central Welfare Council to have mercy and send us some bedclothes, clothes, blankets and support in cash from the American donations for four people: me, my husband, our daughter Perta and our son Szymon, who works as a

draftsman in Lviv [illegible word written in Cyrillic alphabet] – he was robbed of everything, they even took his drawing instruments.

Regards,

The Najmanowicz family

Lublin Grodzka 36/16

Central Welfare Council

Nr IV 6349

O.ot./a/2

Kraków, August 21st 1941

Signed in manuscript/Jewish Social Self-Aid

Kraków/P.O. box 211

We hereby send the application written by the Najmanowicz family, residing in Lublin at Grodzka Street 36/16 with the request to have their issue settled directly.

We have informed the interested party about dropping their case.

POLNISCHER HAUPTAUSSCHUSS

CENTRAL WELFARE COUNCIL

Director

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir
Ethnologist and Cultural Anthropologist, University of Warsaw
j.tokarska-bakir@uw.edu.pl

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