
SMELLING THE GHETTO. Smells in the Warsaw Ghetto According to Ruben Ben Shem's (Feldschu) Diary

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Introduction

This article deals with allusions to smells and odours in Ruben Ben Shem's diary, an extensive journal that was written in the Warsaw ghetto from November 1940 until April 1943. The paper attempts to define the nature of the gap between allusions to smells related to by the diary writer in contrast to our understanding of the information acquired through reading the diary. The difficulty of the attempt relates to elusiveness of odours which causes them to be difficult to imagine, especially if one wasn't exposed to them beforehand. (Katz 1997: 4)

Smells are a prominent element of the human experience as they are an undetached part of the air we breathe, entering our bodies. While being a part of our survival instincts, they involve the creation of meaning: they alert just as they seduce. (Waskul and Vannini 2008: 54) Indeed, the action of smelling cannot be avoided; smells invade the space and remain there as long as the source of smell is not removed. However, the capacity of the language to represent odours is somewhat limited. The vocabulary for the description of smells is constrained and, consequently, smells are very often related to by using semantic fields that are not directly related to this sense, be it comparisons rather than definitions of the nature of the smell, vocabulary of taste, associations etc. (Rindisbacher 2015: 84)

During the Holocaust, the experience of smells was very prominent and played a role that, for the ghetto inmates, was no less menacing than the constant violence inflicted. The reason has to do with the impact of smells on the human experience. In other words, the traumatic quality of life in the ghetto destroyed in their residents almost completely previous olfactory experiences, replacing them with new traumatic meanings. The new bonds in one's memory, between the event and its smell, were on the one hand carved in their memories, and on the other hand, made neither the smell nor its effect

fully communicable to others. The olfactory quality of an event remained to a large extent an intimate experience. (Gigliotti 2009: 157)

The intensity of smells in a human being's life was researched in an experiment conducted by Herz and Schooler. The research dealt with smells as factors that resuscitate memories. One of the conclusions was that "*odors evoke more emotional and biographical memories than visual or verbal cues.*" (Herz and Schooler 2002: 30) According to the researchers "*olfaction colours the manner (stress in the original text) in which we recall the past.*" (*Ibid.*) That explains the significance of smells in the ghetto and also sheds light on the difficulty to separate the event from its smell.

The researcher Langer investigated the inability to forget smells associated with a traumatic experience and examined how deeply smells penetrate our human experience. (Langer 1991: 3) He showed the long-lasting effect of odours, not only during ghettoization or imprisonment in concentration camps but also long after the war. Langer treated Holocaust survivors and found out that a major obstacle in the process of their recovery and healing was bonds created between smells and events which were inscribed in their memory as a unit. His findings suggest that a prominent difficulty in the process of recovery is learning to enjoy new forgotten smells and flavours that once brought joy.

Survivors of Auschwitz, for example, related to the smell of rain in an ambiguous manner as, instead of arousing feelings of delight, rain brought up memories of the camp in which the falling water mixed with human excrement, thus intensifying its smells. (*Ibid.*; Delbo 2001: 1) In other words, the new experience, smelling the rain mingled with the odours of human excrement, was imprinted in their memory in a much more meaningful manner than the experiences of rain before the war. The trauma in the concentration camp erased almost completely previous olfactory bonds creating new ties that were distressful. (Sven-Ake and Engelberg 2000: 218)*

Odours were so intense and constantly present at the ghetto that by the type of smells, one could guess quite accurately which period is being described. Thus, in the winter of 1940-41, the origin of smells was mainly garbage and sewage but, in the spring, and summer of 1941, the smells of the collapsing sewage system and the decaying bodies lying in the streets spread all over, not only because of the warm weather, but also because their quantities rose dramatically. As of the end of July 1942, when deportations

* In his article, the authors refer to research findings that suggest that memories evoked because of smelling something, are not primarily represented in the memory. This may indicate how intimate the relationship between smells and emotions is and how they are linked to a certain event.

started, large areas of the ghetto were emptied of their residents who were first sent to the Umschlagplatz, where deportees were incarcerated before deportation, and then loaded onto train cars sent to Treblinka. ** Smells shifted spaces too, the Umschlagplatz and the trains were the most infested areas in the ghetto. The characteristic smells were of human excrement, vomit etc.

In the ghetto, smells were an almost permanent reality that could not be avoided. Odours were there, accompanying everyone almost constantly. Yet, accounts of the period naturally concentrate on occurrences, though they do mention smells. The attitude to smells is characterized by relating to them as a décor to what takes place in the arena, somewhat like a blanket covering the area. In that respect, for the ghetto's prisoners, the smells themselves were not only indications of the events. Their constant presence, even behind closed doors and windows, made it impossible to forget about the harsh reality that was raging outside one's door.

This article presents how there is no discussion about the Warsaw Ghetto without paying attention to its smells, and yet, how understanding smells escapes us. Our vocabulary, olfactory wise, is too small and inaccurate, while the ability to imagine a life in a constantly infested area is almost impossible. The issue of smell will be examined for its elusive manifestations which on the one hand, demonstrate the imminent and constant threat it posed for the Warsaw ghetto residents and on the other hand, its marginality in comparison to the perils in the ghetto. In other words, even though the olfactory element remained abusively present, its significance was minor in comparison to the occurrences. However, its role in the feelings experienced by the people of the ghetto was outstanding.

1. Smells in Ben Shem's Diary

The German occupation established the Warsaw Judenrat, the Jewish Council, on October 4th, 1939. The complete isolation of the Jewish population was a process that lasted about a year and on November 16th, 1940 the ghetto inmates were locked behind a surrounding wall until the destruction of the ghetto during the Jewish rebellion in May 1943. Behind the walls of the ghetto, the Judenrat was forced to assume municipal responsibilities such as cleaning, burial etc., but their resources were very limited and shrinking with time.(Huberband 1987: 353-354)

** The Umschlagplatz is a German term which refers to a collection point or reloading point. It was an area set up by the Nazis next to the train platform where deportees were held before loading them onto train wagons going to death camps

Until the deportation started, the main cause of death in the ghetto was hunger and disease. (Friedman 1954: 76)* Ben Shem mentions that the Jewish council failed in fulfilling its role: streets were not cleared off garbage and dirt kept piling up everywhere. (Shem - image 14; Engelking 2001: 91) On the other hand, Adam Czerniaków, the head of the Warsaw Ghetto Judenrat, reports in his diary about the huge difficulties they were facing in evacuating garbage from the ghetto, difficulties which were very often imposed by the Germans. (Czerniakow 1970: 167-8)

Ben Shem's diary alludes to an array of smells, most of which have bad connotations. Furthermore, it seems that in the ghetto, even when there are good smells, very quickly they mingle with bad ones, removing any separation, and thus polluting the few good smells that could penetrate the stink. Hence, odours that were often associated with the positive became negative in the conditions of the ghetto, a twist that was aggravating and painful for everyone.

As mentioned before, movement naturally dominates the space in which any event takes place. Smells, however, are invisible and silent but they do engulf the movements in an undetectable manner, unless one is there. By relating to smells Ben Shem casts light on the invisible, hidden, elusive context that is part of the complete image and indicates the boundaries of spaces. The descriptions of smells are unable to convey the exact nature of the odour, the sensation of their constant presence, their unavoidable nature, the phenomenon of becoming accustomed to smells. For those who were never there, smells are like a transparent blanket one can see through but is unable to feel. Ben Shem's special attention to smells makes it possible to penetrate the almost perpetual sensation of life in the ghetto where bad smells seem to overtake the space in an increasingly alarming manner. Alluding to smells, creates an image of the ghetto in all three dimensions because readers get an idea, but only an idea, of what the air was like.

In this paper, the discussion of smells in Ben Shem's diary will be divided into three parts which correlate to events. The first part will focus on smells before the deportation, that is from November 1940 (when the Warsaw ghetto became isolated) until July 22nd, 1942 when the deportations to Treblinka started. This period is characterized by the formation of a cloud of bad smells hanging above the ghetto almost constantly and covering almost all the area. The second part will focus on descriptions of smells after the deportation began. This period represents the shifting of smelly spaces into two areas: the

* Friedman, one of the first historian to research the Holocaust and a survivor himself, writes that the Governor of Warsaw, Ludwig Fischer and Governor General Frank declared in an address in Lvov (On April 1, 1942), that ghettoization was a means to exterminate Jews by starving them.

Umschlagplatz and the train cars in which people were packed like sardines. The third part will deal with two incidents that have to do with *foetor Judaicus* (Jewish stink). (Wurgaft 2006: 58)

2. Smells before the Deportation – 11. 1940-7.1942

2.1 Good Smells and Violence

In January 1941, most of the residents of the ghetto found it difficult to get enough food, and about a third were on the verge of starvation. As the situation deteriorated, there were more violent incidents caused by hunger. According to Ben Shem, there were about 100,000 people who have become beggars, a situation that was bound to lead to their death. (Shem – image 108).

On two different occasions the smell of bread, a smell that in the reality of the ghetto was rare, drove people to violence. One incident concerns A. B. and his family. The incident discussed begins by a description of L.'s pitiful apartment. Ben-Shem writes it was at the end of the courtyard and that his flat was characterized by a "sour" smell noticeable even from the outside (Shem – image 34). He came to visit them but found the front door locked (it was usually kept open). He knocked on the door and when it was finally opened, he found everyone in a pitiful situation.

From bits of words Ben Shem realized what had happened. L. managed to sell some of his valuable books in return for half a loaf of bread and some butter. The "treasure" (Ibid.) was brought home and while L. left again to get tea and a glass of hot water from the neighbours who had promised to supply it, his son, who was lying in bed "smelled the bread and without saying a word, got up as if to go to the toilet (which was in the kitchen) and in the short time L. was at the stores, he managed to finish all the half loaf of bread." (Ibid. ; Gutman 1989: 113)

According to Ben Shem, the boy has actually eaten less than half a loaf of bread as, while L. was carrying the bread home, he nibbled almost half of it and so the boy had, in fact, eaten what was left (a quarter of the loaf). When L. returned home with the tea, the bread was nowhere to be found. L. attacked his wife, both physically as well as verbally as he suspected that she had committed the "crime". Sadly, even after the truth was discovered, L. kept shouting at his wife while trying to console the boy who was by then crying. Ben Shem writes that the fight was finally calmed down by providing them all with the longed-for bread.

This incident exposes the influence of hunger on the relationship within the unit of the family. The boy (according to the records at Yad-Vashem, was about 9 years old) was aware of the fact that the little piece was meant for all of them but was unable to resist the temptation introduced by the smell, which probably surrounded him completely. The father, who knew, that the precious half a loaf of bread is supposed to satisfy three hungry people, bit into it, later to violently turn against his own family.

This incident is preceded in the diary by a description of the kind of sacrifice L. does to provide for his family. L. owned a huge library of almost 3,000 books of which he "*lovingly took care of neglecting everything, the wife the house...*" (Shem – image 33). In the ghetto, L. had to sell his books to get provisions for his family. Ben Shem discusses the issue of selling the books saying, "*in the morning he eats Nietzsche, for dinner two volumes of Keyserling and for supper Le Petit Larousse of which some has been left for breakfast*". (Ibid.) This literary choice may have to do with L.'s strong and emotional bond to his book which have become from "food for thought", actual food.

The smell of bread causes chaos also at the "*point*" when Ben Shem's committee decided to try and help the refugees he visited a few days earlier. (Prais 2015: 314)* On June 8th, 1941, Ben Shem reports that they had brought bread to the "*point*" and although they knew that a one-time a quarter loaf of bread per person would not do much to help the starving, they still decided to do it as "*there is value to good will too.*" (Shem – image 130)

As soon as they got to the "*point*" and the smell of bread penetrated the nostrils of the "*point's*" residents, they became frantic. Ben Shem writes that before he and his company could make up their minds what to do, "*they* (the "*point's*" residents) *determined and not us.*" (Shem – image 131) The pandemonium was indescribable, and Ben Shem writes that he thought scenes of this sort could have been possible only in Middle Ages: the children screaming, adults shouting, cursing, crying, having spasm attacks, all of which could not be controlled, not even when the "*point's*" guards hit them brutally using clubs. Ben Shem writes that he and the others, including the manager of the "*point*", were simply too frightened to intervene and that some of them had tears rolling on their faces.

Both these incidents reveal the pitiful situation of the starving. On the one hand, we notice the sublime attempts of Ben Shem to appease the suffering, faced with the deep sensation of helplessness to rectify the dreadful situation

* The "*point*" was a name given to hostels in the ghetto in which refugees who had been forced into the ghetto were housed. They became notorious for their extremely terrible living conditions.

and on the other hand, the experience of good smells, which, instead of comforting, resuscitate in the starving extreme violence. The aroma of fresh bread acted as an infuriating trigger that made people aggressive and uncontrollable. These reports are confirmed by the Warsaw ghetto physicians, whose research showed that starvation had a devastating effect on people not only physically but also mentally as they became irritable, later to sink into apathy (Grumpert 1949: 289). The smell here illustrates the deterioration of the emotional and mental capacities of those who experienced hunger but highlights the superior feelings of kindness, compassion and understanding on the part of those who tried to help.

2.2 The Smell of the Cosmos Versus the Smell of the Micro-cosmos

As of the spring of 1941, the deterioration of the situation in the ghetto becomes not only visible but also smell-able. In the spring of 1941, April to be exact, Feldschu reports that the sun gets *"into the ghetto fearlessly but rather than warming, it lovingly prefers the toilets and especially the huge piles of garbage in the streets which immediately leads to emission of smells that are so horrible, so suffocating and annoying that a headache attacks you as soon as you leave the house."* (Shem – image 99)

This entry is quite long and stresses the frustration and pain experienced by everyone living in the ghetto. The stink is contrasted with the beauty of the wilderness and open spaces of the "behind the wall": *"How much do our soles yearn the wilderness, the field, movement... You want to expand your lungs and breathe it in and suddenly, suffocation... you run... trying to breath out the 'spring air' (inverted commas in the original text) ..."*(Shem – image 99) Further on, Ben Shem concludes this a very long and painful entry by alluding cynically to the fact that nature acts in fact as an enemy agent: *"Everything works solely for us. The lice prepare a terrible plague, the sun stinks. The war is a disappointment for us..."* (Shem – image 100) According to Ben Shem, the streets of the ghetto felt exposed and defenceless because in the entire ghetto there was only one tree and it was in the cemetery. The colour of green is not to be seen in the ghetto, he says agonizingly. (Shem – image 99)

The frustration, anger and deep sense of despair are manifested through the contrasting description of the world outside the wall to that of the inside. The stink and suffocation oppose the good smells one recalls of what spring consisted of. Here, unlike what has come to be known as the Proust Effect, the

process is opposite.¹ It is the stink that makes the writer remember, compare and yearn for the smells of the past.

This situation of continuous stink was not a passing nuisance. On May 1942, that is, about two months before the deportations begin, Ben Shem reports with satisfaction that he and his Friend Propes have found a corner where they could meet on their afternoon walks and enjoy "...the sun which comes straight from the Polish streets and has not yet been detained in the ghetto streets where it absorbs the stench and filth. A sun just like before the war." (Shem – image 280) The corner in question was close to the wall surrounding the ghetto and that is why it was relatively free of bad smells. This entry, almost a year after the passage concerning the spring stink, illustrates the continuous reality of an aching cloud of smell that was engulfing the ghetto.

2.3 Death and Life

As early as the end of December 1940 Ben Shem alludes to the huge number of dead, mostly due to hunger, and says that if their numbers were smaller, people would not be so indifferent. According to him, a smaller number would raise their fear but as the quantities were so high, people have become indifferent (Shem – image 17). The spring of 1941 exposes the difficult situation and, according to the diary, physicians at the ghetto were worried that the warm weather would spread the plague (epidemic typhus). Indeed, between June-August 1941 typhus does spread and the number of the dead becomes a much more burning issue.

On May 28th, 1941, the dimension of the epidemic is so prominent that Ben Shem writes that: "*In normal years the dead are apart, and the living are apart, a separation that doesn't exist anymore.*" (Shem – image 125) This observation is interesting as the scale of the epidemic becomes evident, indicating how deeply Jewish culture and religious observation have been violated. According to Jewish law, the dead are considered defiled and the clear-cut separation between the dead and the living is observed strictly and meticulously by the religious and the non-religious alike. This entry, therefore, alludes to the total desecration of life in the ghetto, as the dead lie in the streets, and the ghetto

¹ Hamilton Paula, 'The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses', URL: https://www.academia.edu/6931894/The_Proust_Effect_Oral_History_and_the_Senses, accessed 31.1.2018. The Proust effect relates to a phenomenon described in Marcel Proust's book *A La Recherche du temps Perdu. Volume 1, Swann's Way*, when he writes about drinking lime blossom tea and tasting a madeleine cookie which revive in him memories of the past that were directly related to these smells and taste.

authorities are unable to overcome the growing number of dead. People have been drawn into extreme conditions of distress and are dying in the streets. "... *The epidemic eats Jews up ... and when the snow will melt all the filth that froze will begin to stink... Lately it has become the custom to literally die in the streets... It takes twelve hours...*"(Shem – image 94)

Around July 1941, Ben Shem goes to the cemetery for a funeral of a friend. Frustrated he writes "*I couldn't stand at the shop gate (the cemetery gate to where the dead are brought before their burial) because of the smell of those blotted and plagued, despite the very strong lime which is poured there, the smell is so strong that your eyes fill with tears and it creeps inside you evoking nausea and faint...*" (Shem – image 144) By July, the majority of the dead brought to the cemetery are anonymous as they were found on the streets. Undertakers struggle to cope with the burial of an enormous quantity of people and therefore everything is done in haste and without ceremony. Ben Shem writes that the only thing which is observed before pushing the dead to the mass graves is the separation between men and women (Winick 2017: 105).

By August 1941 one can learn about the appalling conditions that have developed as this entry relates not only to the smells of the dead but also to the impact of the smells on the living "... *the bad smell in the ghetto from each man and woman and the constant suffocation makes one's improperly washed shirt, because of lack of soap, stick to the body...and in this way you run all day long from one corner to the other fearing kidnapping and not only from the Germans but also from your brothers, the Jewish Police and the sight of thousands of beggars and hundreds of dead whose flat corpses lie right before your eyes in the streets...*"(Shem – image 172) The incapacity to escape, to find but a temporary relief from the penetrating reality is well expressed here by using the language of the senses: the sights one cannot avoid and even one's own body smell, a living proof to the declining poor sanitation in the ghetto.

2.4 Memories Evoked by Smells

Maybe it is understandable that the diary of Ruben Ben Shem has little allusions to the Proust Effect: smells evoking good memories. In the ghetto, most of the smells are either bad or distorted versions of good. Yet, the diary does contain two incidents which involve recollection of the past through smells experienced in the ghetto.

When Ben Shem walks around the ghetto, in a bad mood caused by his frustration due to his unsuccessful attempts to find a way to escape, he recalls

that there used to be a synagogue in the area (the synagogue may have been near or in 6 Zamenhof, in a passage in the yard). Ben Shem writes that he suddenly hears a buzz that was very close, but that he had ignored until then. The buzz is what makes him remember the synagogue and he writes that as soon as he opens the door, his face "... was shock waved by the smell of a familiar synagogue (in the text Ben Shem uses the Yiddish term *cloise*) mixed with frost mist and tens of bodies stuck inside worn out old clothes." (Shem – image 65) Here, Ben Shem describes in a most touching manner the fervent prayer, the men who were praying and the shabby room. About the fire place he says that it is "sobbing" as "bits of coal are ending their miserable life", and the walls are "tearing" (*Ibid.*) but, despite the miserable setting, there is warmth, a warmth he attributes to the passionate prayers.

Even if Ben Shem recalls the old and familiar synagogue because of the smell that hits him in the face once he opens the door, the description shifts immediately to the present, around February 1941. In other words, the odor indeed evokes the past, but it seems that being reminded of the past doesn't make his mind drift to the old synagogue but rather to stick to the present. The room is full of men praying, bringing back the old tunes, people of whom some do not understand the meaning of the words (prayers are always in Hebrew), but all of them feel the prayer. The keen prayer of the present overcasts what Ben Shem has known before because of the contradiction with the outside, a world of murder, frost, hunger lice etc. (Shem – image 67)

However, Passover of 1941, which fell on a Friday, April 11th was different. Feldschu recounts that when he comes back from the synagogue, the house is filled with happiness, excitement and good smells: "*In the kitchen my wife and relative 'make noises'* (in inverted comma in the original text) *and from the kitchen the smells of the Pesach (Passover) soup with kneidlakh and the smell of wine...*" (Shem – image 97) Ben Shem keeps describing this beautiful image of a family gathering during one of the most important events of the Hebrew calendar, the Jewish holiday of Pesach which celebrates the divine intervention to free the ancient Jews from slavery in Egypt.

In his diary, he dedicates a lot of attention to that evening and says that each of the lines of the prayer and blessing was pronounced more emphatically this time, making an analogy between their present confinement to the ghetto and the traditional story. "*I mumbled 'commemorating the departure from Egypt'* (in quotation marks in the original text) *and with all my heart I participated in the exodus from Egypt and in all the exoduses of my people from trouble to the open, from slavery to salvation.*" (*Ibid.*) This beautiful passage conveys the sensation of a break, a break from the raging chaos outside the door, a break between the space of the house immersed in the traditional smells of the Pesach cooking, a break from the bad smells outside.

The description of the apartment manages to create an image of a microcosm inside the ghetto, a microcosm that reaches far beyond the ghetto walls, into ancient Egypt, the exodus over which the All Mighty supervised attentively, and therefore the description appears to be calling upon God to recreate the same miracle again.

Nonetheless, more memories are evoked, and they are attributed not to the smells, but rather to the music, the traditional chants of the holiday which make Ben Shem's mind drift to past holidays, when he was still living with his parents. He recalls his father's household that by now, he says, may have been destroyed, comforting himself that "*the tune exists in the heart of every Jew religious or not ... in the warehouse of his soul...*" (Shem – image 98) This observation is contrasted with the horrors outside the house where "... *he reigns, one millimeter from the windows but here, in the room, my house rooms, he has no control.*" (Ibid.) This very long entry from April 1941, comes just before the account discussing spring in the ghetto, the spring which intensified all the bad smells. Perhaps the description of the family gathering of Pesach is the strongest contradiction to the horrors outside the door, not only in terms of action but also in terms of smell.

3. Smells after the Deportations

3.1 Smells in Situations One Must Imagine - Smells in the Ghetto

After July 1942, when deportations began, the ghetto space and geography changed completely. It has shrunk in size as the Germans forced people out of their homes and had them march first to the Umschlagplatz and then transported to Treblinka. The emptied areas were separated from one another and those remaining were mostly living in the shops' premises.(Gutman 1989: 75)*

The remaining population in the ghetto by September 1942 consisted mainly of people who had work permits which were supposed to provide protection from deportation. They were practically enslaved to the shops and were not allowed to circulate between the different areas of the ghetto. They were terrorized constantly, especially those who had a family, because most women and children did not have work permits and were constantly targeted, even when they were in the shops (Ibid.). None of those employed at the shops lived in their own house. They were given permission to reside in certain

* The shops were German factories established in the ghetto and after the deportation started, many Jews strived to become part of them as they believed it might save their lives.

apartment buildings which were empty. These belonged to those who had already been deported.

Between September 13-15, 1942, Ben Shem writes in his diary about the journey of a certain man who managed to escape from the round up area. Ben Shem finished this report by saying that when he looked at the man's face and eyes, he understood his shock and he was certain that "***the smell would remain in the man's senses and the stink would accompany him for his whole life and forever would it spoil any happy moment he might experience in the future.***" (Shem – image 458) Just like Langer realized the role of smell involved in traumatic events, so did Ben Shem's instinctively recognize the power of smells to affect a man's life in the long run. (Langer 1991: 3)

The incident takes place about two months after the deportations from the Warsaw ghetto started. Feldschu and his family are on the run, and, so far, have managed to avoid the deportation by obtaining a work permit to the shop of Oskar Schilling, specialized in wood products. Ben Shem writes that when he was coming home at noon time, a horrible smell bursts out of the ground floor apartment.*

At first it is suspected that the origin of the stink was a sewage pipe that broke. The door to the ground floor apartment is opened by a frightened woman whose clothes are stinking too. Feldschu says that inside the flat the stink becomes even stronger. "*As we insisted on understanding what was going on, the woman burst out crying and opened the door to a small room with an iron bed where her husband was lying....* (this mark appears in the original text) *I had never seen this kind in my life. In his eyes, fear inhabited, a fear that frightened us too. His nose and the whole face was ... moving, unsteady while the stink dissipated from him.*" (Shem – image 458)

The man tells him that he left his house on Sunday, September 13 to go to "square." (Ringelblum 1989: 312)** He was certain he wouldn't be sent to the Umschlagplatz as he was young and healthy and therefore, fit for work. He was wrong. The police were anxious to provide the Germans with the right number of people and so they ignored his qualities. The man managed to escape but was noticed and chased diligently by Ukrainian guards. Finally, he managed to creep into a sewage pit planting his whole body including his head inside the

* What Ben Shem refers to as "home", is not really his apartment. He was forced out of his apartment into buildings that were allocated to the shop of Oskar Schilling where he was working. The buildings in question were apartment whose residents had been caught and deported to Treblinka.

** The corners of streets where Jews were going through selection – the quadrangle of Gesia, Smocza, Niska and Zamenhofa streets.

infested substance leaving only part of the nose out. The Ukrainians shot into the hole but didn't hurt him and left. The man stayed inside that slimy liquid for a whole day.

Obviously, Ben Shem himself is shocked, not only by the horrible smells surrounding the apartment that he too is forced to inhale but also by the sight of that agonizing man whose instincts to live had made him sink in the stink. The man's instinctive choice to hide in the sewage pit is representation of the shrinking space of living, eradication of any separation between what is human to what is not. The lack of verbal communication between the victim and the pursuer is an indication that Jews are no longer perceived as living souls, but they are meat, hunt, a quantity.

The pursuer's attempt to catch the man would not go as far as reaching inside the sewage pit. The victim's survival instincts did not betray him but, possibly, took humanity away from him. After all, some of the basic aspects of being a human are respect, pride, and appreciation for aesthetics. This episode is interesting as two instincts collide - the primal survival instinct and the instinct to avoid what stinks as stink, to all of us, represents danger, threat, and suffocation. The man faced with death chooses to stink, but the experience, brought to him by his senses, is so agonizing that, although alive, he is severely traumatized. Yet, here smells, even the worse ones, are salvation...

3.2 Smells at the Umschlagplatz and the Journey to Treblinka

The smells people were exposed to at the Umschlagplatz and the trains were especially traumatizing. If, up until the deportation, people have had a few hours a day during which they could be in their own space, their house, the street, work etc., the process of the deportation robbed them entirely of this privacy. The deportees were forced into extremely crowded areas and even the right to privately go to the toilet was denied to them.

Consequently, the immediate space of detention was inundated with horrible smells caused by bodily reactions to the stress, fear and trauma. People not only lost the little freedom that they had until then but they were forced now to be in physical contact with others as they were squeezed into small areas. As the guards ignored the personal needs of the gathered, people were forced into discharging aching bodily pressures in public. People were held for hours, if not days, in extremely crowded conditions which impaired their human dignity, as the pressure inflicted on their body invaded their minds and their capacity for self-control ([Low 2016: 613](#)).

On August 5th, 1942, a man called P., was kidnapped, taken to the Umschlagplatz first, and then put onto a cattle wagon going to Treblinka. Being young, he was chosen to work in Treblinka and this provided him with the opportunity to run away, which he did. (Arad 1984: 4) Having nowhere else to turn to, he went back to his brother's house at the Warsaw Ghetto from where he was deported in the first place. (Shem – image 507) Ben Shem and other people went to that family to hear from the escapee what was waiting for them at Treblinka.

The man had a hard time giving this testimony and was clearly in shock. Bit by bit, and with the help of his brother, he recovered enough to tell his story, while sparing no details from his listeners. According to this report, they were held at the Umschlagplatz for at least 24 hours, and later spent about 7 hours in the wagons. Ben Shem writes that the man said that from the perspective of a man who had been to Treblinka, staying at the Umschlagplatz was "*at the most a prologue, an introduction, a corridor, where one witnesses bits of the play but not the play itself.*" (Shem – image 497)

Rooms at the Umschlagplatz were packed with people and the air stank of faces, vomit and urine while noises of cries, pleading, and gunshots anguished and horrified the people inside. The stink was unbearable and so was the noise. All of that was driving people out of themselves.² People sold their gold watches for a glass of mouldy water, mothers provided their children with liquid by using their saliva... (Shem – image 497) In this torturous way people were held at the Umschlagplatz overnight.

Things became even worse when they were loaded onto the cattle wagons to begin the journey to Treblinka. It was sheer horror. P. talked about the first moment of being loaded, being pushed fiercely inside, the door closing and the temperature in the car raising, making the conditions even worse than they were before. The man describes feelings of not having enough air, people pushing and hitting each other in an attempt to make some space for themselves, people vomiting, urinating, getting spasms of diarrhea. A young man fainted, and to help him they picked him up above their heads to approach him to the little window, to "*the air, and that air meant the air of the Umschlagplatz courtyard, air filled with disease, sickness, feces, stench and dead bodies from shooting as well as various other corpses.*" (Shem – image 496)

He talked about people wanting the journey to begin, pounding on the door anxiously, shouting for the train to go, people struggling to breath, vomiting, as

² Polish Research Institute at Lund University, *The Physicians of Warsaw*, Sweden, date of the protocol: January 5, 1946, protocol No. 83, Institute member at the protocol: Luba MELCHIOR, Translation from Polish by Kris Murawski, P. 5.

well as the horrible smells that engulfed them all because many people, and especially the children, had defecated on themselves. The effect of the dreadful smells was devastating and "*penetrated the inside of each men.*" (*Ibid.*) This disgust is instantly extinguished when one man reminds the others of the purpose of that journey: "*We are traveling to our death, do you understand, to die!*" (*Ibid.*) P. says that this cry mad them all silent for a moment at which point many people from all corners of the wagon burst out crying frantically. (*Stenslund 2016: 345*)*

The description of the journey in Ben Shem's journal is very long. If the detainees felt the time in the wagons was interminable, almost an eternity, Ben Shem's writing certainly provides some of this sensation. The train had stopped at least twice on the way, and some people died in the car, some fainted, and some tried as much as they could to break the walls of the car and escape. Yet, smell-wise, the air in the wagon became a little better as "*the train was travelling fast, and the air of the fields penetrated the wood boards. There was a lot of wind in the car.*" (*Shem – image 499*)

The lengthy description indeed manages to convey the feeling of a pre-death situation, of reduced space, of seemingly squeezing a lot of people into one flesh, while bodily excrement escapes uncontrollably. Yet, having thin prospects of life, people forget about their present distress, focusing on ameliorating the present by praying, and attempting to save their future by breaking the wagon's wall, trying to escape (*Gigliotti 2009: 49***)

4. The Smell of Jews

It seems that the smell of the ghetto bothered an Austrian soldier-physician who went for a visit to his Jewish acquaintance. Around April 1942, the soldier spent several hours at the house of his acquaintance and the gist of the discussion was the physician's conclusion that Jews had a special smell, according to him "*a really inhuman smell...*" (*Shem – image 256*) The passage describing the visit begins by Ben Shem asking himself if Jews have indeed been lowered to such a degree that they have become a different biological species. The soldier-physician claimed that "*he had debated the issue and came up with no solution, not to the kind of smell and not to its intensity. He deliberately left the ghetto to walk in Polish streets and then came back to the*

* Here the writer talks about people getting used to smells without the disappearance of odorous molecules. The phenomenon is called olfactory adaptation.

** Gigliotti writes that "*As indicated from Jäcklein's testimony, train journeys were death spaces and those who managed to survive its stresses were in states of shock and decline ...*"

ghetto and he was immediately struck by that same strange smell. (Ibid.) The Austrian compares the unique features of the smells in the ghetto to distinct odors of farms. According to him: "... *the same goes with the ghetto which has a specific smell of its own, not human in any case ...*" (Ibid.)

Maybe not all the discussion was reported in the journal but, from what was written, it seems strange that the Austrian did not raise any questions as for the reasons the ghetto smelled so badly. Didn't he see the starving people? The dead lying in the streets? Did he not realize that in the Polish streets it was much cleaner and there were no dead bodies around? Strangely, it seems that the Austrian soldier-physician had isolated his "research" and narrowed it to analysing the nature of the smell, and not its causes.

Ben Shem concludes this passage, cynically, by saying that Jews have undeniably "...*been elevated and have been taken out of the class of man, ...our organism became a different zoological type...*" (Ibid.) Strangely, this entry does not seem to contain any criticism towards the Austrian soldier's clearly unscientific conclusions. Objectively, the ghetto and its residents indeed smelled, but there were factual reasons for that, reasons that were deliberately ignored here by Ben Shem, probably because he lamented the situation, rather than agreed that Jews have become a new species. The accusations of the Austrian, while truthfully describing the odour of the ghetto, certainly had an Anti-Semitic flair (Junginger 2017: 16)

The smell of Jews follows them after the deportation too. Ben Shem reports about the unlucky journey of a man called N. whose wife and daughter were arrested on their way from the ghetto to the longed for hiding place in the Arian side. It seems that the smell of garlic was the pretext for their arrest. The story is that when the concierge at the Polish building saw the women and their belongings, he "*smelled, understood, tasted the bone and sent two agents to the house.*" (Shem – image 612) When those arrived and checked the women's forged identity documents, including their church membership certificate, they still arrested the women claiming that they both had smelled of garlic, and therefore, they were certainly Jewish. Ben Shem says that their fate was doomed.

Was it the women's appearance? Their frightened eyes? The smell they carried with them from the ghetto? Clearly, both the concierge and the agents were interested in what Ben Shem calls "*the bone*", (Ibid.) that is the money involved in turning in Jews. The pretext, the smell of garlic, is an allegation strongly rooted in the European Anti-Semitism (Largey and Watson 1972: 96). Therefore, the smell could be understood as defining your origin, and, because of it, lethal for Jews in Holocaust.

Conclusion

Employing the lens of smells and odours to understand the ghetto offers a unique opportunity to gain insight into ghetto life from the perspective of the hidden, unspeakable and despicable. Ruben Ben Shem's diary reveals and exposes a reality of experiences that are sensual in their nature, and this characteristic makes the discussion of these issues, even if not a taboo, certainly difficult and rare. Yet, relating to smelling and odours is eye-opening because it sheds light on the hidden constant presence of the veil of bad smells that is hanging above everyone in the ghetto. This angle enables us to penetrate into the world of daily emotions of the ghetto residents which were constantly bonding the violent surroundings and the smells that accompanied them.

The descriptions of smells in the diary manage to convey the idea that the ghetto was a universe of its own. Literally a universe, as the cloud of malodorous smells, which was covering the area, plainly, if invisibly, isolated it from the rest of the world, both physically and morally. If the ghetto could be imagined as a huge balloon full of bad smells, the evacuation of the people to the Umschlagplatz and the trains would be the image of evaporating air, which represents the emptying and shrinking of life.

Yet, Ben Shem's accounts, as creative and explicit as they may be, still fail to fully expose that sensation created by being continuously surrounded by bad smells. The journal leaves the notion of smells and odours in the complex zone of the inexplicable.³ As mentioned before, the occurrences in the ghetto that have become more common and more violent respectively increase the intensity of smells. It called upon the ghetto inmates to find their capacity to learn to live with those smells, to accept them as part of their life (Zufall and Leinders-Zufall 2000: 473-81)* Ben Shem's diary exemplifies it curiously enough, as bad smells are referred to only when they exceed a certain norm, a norm that kept deteriorating steadily. Even though it is clear from the text that smell was a continuous nuisance that accompanied the life in the ghetto, the descriptions of smells are relatively limited in number.

³ Rachel J. Herz, URL: <https://www.wellspringwritingworkshops.com/single-post/2017/04/30/Handout-Exercise-Spring-2017-Workshop>

Herz is quoted to have said on the October 2011 in the issue of *The Scientific American*, that "Smell speaks to our primal mind... More than that, smell acts like a laser, cutting straight through to our emotional cores... No other sensory system has this type of intimate link with the neural areas of emotion and associative learning..." .

* The article states that "In the context of sensory processing, odor adaptation refers to the ability of the olfactory system to adjust its sensitivity at different stimulus intensities..." .

Through allusions to smells it is possible to get an idea of what daily life was like, regardless of the impossible violent behaviour that characterized life in the Warsaw ghetto. Smells of before the deportation do not reveal more about the extremely stressful daily life in the ghetto but do shed light on the sensation of life. If events were not harsh enough, the smells certainly rendered the realities of life much more difficult and penetrating in every possible way. There was nowhere to escape from odour (Friedman 1954: 76).

When good smells spread through the ghetto, rather than having a calming effect, they became incentives for losing any regard to values by reviving the extinguishing instinct of life. L's apartment smells "sour", (Shem – image 34) while the "point" stinks and the good smells of bread do not appease but rather incite to degradation.

Smells evoking memories hardly exist in the ghetto. On the contrary, smells are usually so bad that if they don't conjure bad feelings, they certainly don't resuscitate good ones. Yet, Ben Shem recalls the familiar synagogue where he used to pray but this smell of the synagogue in the ghetto is not nostalgic as it is nothing like the past. On the contrary, in the ghetto it is despite the present that the prayer is as fervent as in the past, and this is what fascinates Ben Shem.

This is contrasted with the smells of Passover eve, with its good smells of food, the description, particularly striking, as it is almost a time capsule, a space within a space. In the household, as Ben Shem says, "one millimetre from the windows..." (Shem – image 98) a different world reigns. The smells in the house isolate and shelter the apartment from the smelly cloud outside, while highlighting the internal spaces, both the physical, and the spiritual.

The smells of the ghetto define it as well as its residents as they smell too, thus creating an invisible border between the ghetto and the Arian side. It seems that the forces of nature are overpowered, once they enter the universe of the ghetto. Here the effect of men defeats the healing powers of nature, only to render them very powerful in accentuating what men has been able to "create" in the ghetto: the filth, the dead, the disease. Nature in the ghetto worked against the living, the sun's warmth intensifying the bad smells indicating the germs' reproduction thus spreading disease etc. The ghetto becomes the incarnation of obscurity mirroring the opposite of a divine creation, a man-made universe.

Possibly one of the most memorable incidents involving smell of Ben Shem's diary is his description of the man who spent a day hiding in a sewage pit. Here, the man's animalistic survival instincts clash with his human instinct to avoid what stinks, as it represents disease and death. The man survives but the price for his survival is severe trauma. The ghetto forces its inhabitants to

include in their lives the unspeakable, and survival requires letting go of dignity.

The smells and odours that have attacked the unfortunate who have been captured and sent to the Umschlagplatz and later to Treblinka stand out. Maybe more than anything, the smells there represent the total assault, the diminution, the final, complete disregard to any human value in relation to the victims, but also to the perpetrators. The stink and suffocation in the rooms of the Umschlagplatz and the train wagons, the agony and torture of the victims become an allegory to the real end, the gas chambers of Treblinka.

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