Studia Judaica 28 (2025), nr 1 (55), s. 97–114
doi:10.4467/24500100STJ.25.004.22003

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Perceptions of Death in the Writings of Josef Zelkowicz[1]

Abstract: This article examines how writers in the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto perceived life, or, more precisely, death, focusing on Josef Zelkowicz, a prominent Łódź intellectual. The scope of the writings he penned during the interwar period and later while working in the Łódź ghetto archive allows us to examine the concept of "continuity." Despite the substantial differences between the two periods, lines of continuity are evident and their very existence, even in the sharp transition to the extreme reality of the ghetto, testifies to the great power of the patterns formed before the war.

Keywords: Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto, Łódź, Holocaust literature, ghettos, interwar Polish Jewry, ghettos death.

Słowa kluczowe: Getto łódzkie, Łódź (Litzmannstadt), literatura Holokaustu, getto, Żydzi polscy w okresie międzywojennym, śmierć w gettach.

This article examines how writers in the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto perceived life or, more precisely, death, in the ghetto, focusing on one prominent Łódź intellectual, Josef Zelkowicz. Having settled in the city as an adult, Zelkowicz wrote short stories for the local Yiddish press in the prewar period. During World War II, he was imprisoned in the Łódź ghetto, where he worked in the ghetto archive.[2] The scope of Zelkowicz's works from the interwar period and those written later while interned in the ghetto allows us to examine the key concept of "continuity" by

[1] The article is based on a chapter from my book, see Yaron Nir-Freisager, *Days of Dread: Josef Zelkowicz and the Circle of Intellectuals in the Łódź Ghetto* (Jerusalem, 2024) (Hebrew).

[2] Monika Polit, *Piszący te słowa jest pracownikiem gettowej instytucji…: "Z Dziennika" i inne pisma z łódzkiego getta* (Warsaw, 2019), 9–42.

reviewing his writings while searching for continuity or discontinuity in terms of language, symbols, identity, and ideology. Presumably, studying the earlier worldviews of Łódź Jewry can contribute to our understanding of the ghetto period and how the residents perceived events in the ghetto. Indeed, the various stories he penned between the two world wars frequently refer to death, demonstrating that Zelkowicz was interested in death long before he entered the ghetto. Specifically, this article asks how Zelkowicz's perception of death changed during the ghetto period.

Early writings about death: Urban death in Łódź (1927–1928)

Zelkowicz published two series of stories in the Łódź Yiddish press in the years 1927–1928. The first, which appeared in the daily newspaper נײַער פֿאָלקסבלאַט [*Nayer Folksblat*], concerned the residents of the slum district of Balut [Polish: Bałuty], while the second, published in the weekly לאָדזשער אַרבעטער [*Lodzsher Arbeter*], focused on those who worked on the city's streets.

In the first series, "In the Houses of Bałuty," death features as an integral part of life in Łódź.[3] The old grandmother in the story entitled "For the Great-Grandson a Pair of Bags" is a vital woman who collapses and dies because of her difficult living conditions. Shimele, in the story named after him, cares for his terminally ill partner, who passes away in his arms. In the story "Two Who Died," a young married couple chooses to die together, unable to cope with a serious illness. In another story about two spinster sisters, the grandfather and father pass away one after the other. Death in these stories about Bałuty is not a natural death, and the harsh living conditions constitute a major factor contributing to the high mortality rate. Zelkowicz uses death to portray life in his literary Bałuty district, thus intensifying the power of the district over the individual. Accordingly, in these stories, death constitutes a central theme.

The second series of stories, "Street People," concerns workers on the fringes of society: porters, sewer workers, and roofers. For these people, early death was part of the course of life. A family of weavers faces difficulties because their earnings cannot provide for their basic needs, thus

[3] Josef Zelkowicz, "In baluter shtubn – bildlekh fun noyt un elent" [In the Houses of Bałuty – Small Pictures of Distress and Loneliness], *Nayer Folksblat* (4 Nov. 1927 – 2 Mar. 1928).

leading to a cycle of hunger, disease, and death.[4] Hunger and poverty also cause early death in the story "The Child Is Asleep": in the home of Avraham the Hatter, "Poverty cries from the walls." There, death tickles his wife "every two minutes with his pricking fingers," Avraham cries in his bed from hunger, while "death stood by (Avraham son's) head, sharpening his sword."[5] The presence of death permeates the story, a hidden figure who was a family member, part of the landscape of Łódź.

Working conditions kill the worker in the story "So He Lived, So He Died."[6] A strong and healthy worker collapses and dies in the arms of his loving family due to a fatal respiratory disease. Despite his wife's efforts to fend off death, calling for a doctor and begging for help, death is victorious. Death at a young age was an inevitable fate. Zelkowicz shapes the characters in his stories in such a way that death is part of their milieu; indeed, there is no point in resisting.

A devastating plague

"כולי‘ע רשע‹קע און זיינע בנים" [Kholie Rash'ke and His Sons] is a series of eighteen short stories that was published in the daily newspaper *Nayer Folksblat* between 20 October 1933 and 23 February 1934 describing a cholera epidemic that struck the city and claimed victims en masse.

Cholera, a plague caused by bacteria, results in dehydration and shock, and, if not treated, may lead to death. In 1892, a cholera epidemic broke out in Łódź.[7] Although cholera is a medieval disease that modern medicine and sanitation have overcome, this is not the case in Zelkowicz's fictional Łódź reality.

Zelkowicz describes at length the arrival of death, which plays a central role in the stories and is even one of the main characters. "Will he come? The angel of death has time, he is in no hurry, no one will escape from him, the city is blocked from all directions. The terror is growing, there is

[4] Josef Zelkowicz, "Az es treft amol: …bildl fun arbeter lebn" [Sometimes It Happens: …A Picture of Workers' Life], *Lodzsher Arbeter* (5 Oct. 1928), 3.

[5] Josef Zelkowicz, "Dos kind is geshlofn" [The Child Is Asleep], *Lodzsher Arbeter* (2 Jan. 1930), 3.

[6] Josef Zelkowicz, "Azoy gelebt azoy geshtorbn" [So He Lived, So He Died], *Lodzsher Arbeter* (12 Apr. 1929), 2–3.

[7] Yehiel Yeshaya Trunk, *Poyln: Zikhryones un bilder* (New York, 1949), 149–152, 157–162.

no motivation to work, the people want to fly away like birds."[8] The horror of death intensifies even before any of the city's residents are infected with the disease. The expected arrival of the plague leaves no choice but to await the hand of fate; there is no way to escape death.

The fatal disease kills rich and poor alike. Yet cholera facilitates a long-desired change for Kholie Rash'ke, the main character. This series of stories differs fundamentally from other works by Zelkowicz, in which the characters submit to death without a struggle. Kholie Rash'ke survives the mass death that mercilessly claims those around him and makes a significant change in his life: he manages to extricate himself from the cycle of poverty.

The main response to this mass death was the increased activity of the Chevra Kadisha [burial society]. Zelkowicz demonstrated an interest in the activities of the burial society early on, in 1933. Five years later, he published an article concerning a burial society in a small town (see below). The description of the Chevra Kadisha is an important element in Zelkowicz's perception of death. In cases of mass death, an effort is made to bury the dead according to Jewish tradition. Although during a plague swift burial of the dead is necessary for reasons of sanitation, it seems that Zelkowicz was interested in burial customs not only for this reason. Although the community was unable to combat the plague, it managed with great effort to bury the many dead. Zelkowicz highly respects the way the community coped.

Eventually, a higher force ends the plague:

> In the chronicle written at that time, one can find an accurate description of the rabbi's bitter struggle with the angel of death and his two sharp swords. It was written very clearly how the rabbi subdued the angel of death and pushed him out of town. The rabbi closed the gates of the cemetery, held the key, and shouted in the middle of the town market: Enough! Enough victims, (get) out of here![9]

This description recalls that of the cholera outbreak in Łódź found in the memoirs of Yehiel Yeshaya Trunk. Indeed, Trunk records a prayer led by Rabbi Eliyahu Meisel in a Bałuty synagogue to banish the disease.[10]

[8] Josef Zelkowicz, "Es hot zikh ongehoybn" [It Started], *Nayer Folksblat* (24 Nov. 1933), 10. All quotes from Yiddish and Hebrew texts are translated by the author of the article.

[9] Josef Zelkowicz, "Fun der luft rint blut" [Blood Flows from the Air], *Nayer Folksblat* (8 Dec. 1933), 10.

[10] Trunk, *Poyln*, 157–162.

The presence of a functioning community is prominent in the story, for example in public prayers and burial activities. Yet, while individuals in Zelkowicz's early stories from the 1920s faced death alone, without the support of their family and community, a strong and united community struggles with mass death in the cholera stories. Furthermore, the plague erupted during "terrible days" in the broadest sense of the term: it began in the month of Elul just before the Jewish high holy days, only affected the Jewish community, and stemmed from the city hospital. The cause of the mass mortality was an invisible, intangible, uncontrollable force that descended from heaven. Mass death would resurface in Zelkowicz's writings only during the war. Indeed, the wartime descriptions utilize some of the elements that appeared here.

Academic writing about death

The journal לאָדזשער וויסנשאַפֿטלעכע שריפֿטן [*Lodzsher Visnshaftlekhe Shriftn* (Łódź Scientific Journal)], published in 1938 in Łódź, contained two articles by Zelkowicz. One, "Death and Accompanying Moments in Jewish Ethnography and Folklore,"[11] includes hundreds of different terms related to the process of caring for the dead. Instead of saying "טויט" [dead] or "אָפּגעשטאָרבן" [to go away], "the people" found different expressions—serious, ironic, and even contemptuous. It was possible to understand customs surrounding death through language construction.

In the second article, Zelkowicz wrote about Jewish burial customs: "A Picture from the Life of a Jewish Community in a Small Polish Town in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century."[12] The article provides a detailed description of the burial society in Jewish Lutomiersk, near Łódź. The treatment of the dead was a central element in the perception of death. Ensuring a correct death was a linguistic matter in the first article and a practical matter in the second.

Zelkowicz's study of death was multidimensional: ethnographic, linguistic, literary, religious, cultural, and communal. The broad scope of his writings reveals his special interest in death. His perspective on this topic entailed two seemingly contradictory principles. He was at once deeply

[11] Josef Zelkowicz, "Er toyt un zayne bagleyt-momentn in der yidisher etnografye un folklor," *Lodzsher Visnshaftlekhe Shriftn* (1938).

[12] Josef Zelkowicz, "A bild fun yidishn gezelshaftlekhn lebn in a poylisher shtetl in der tsveyter helft funem 19tn yarhundert," *Lodzsher Visnshaftlekhe Shriftn* (1938).

interested in death, and hence the subject was central to his work before the war, yet, at the same time, he believed that one should not look at death directly. His extensive writings dealt with death consistently but only indirectly. For example, none of his writings contains a description of the moment of death. The two articles that Zelkowicz penned were published less than a year before the outbreak of World War II and were his last significant writings before the ghetto period.

Writing in the Łódź ghetto

In the summer of 1942, Oskar Singer, Zelkowicz's colleague and later the manager of the ghetto archive, wrote:

> Litzmannstadt's [the German name of occupied Łódź] death was unknown in Europe . . . humans did not know such a death. Just at this time, the normal course of life was changed and death changed its character. . . . We can no longer die like other people. Litzmannstadt's death is an alienated and cruel death.[13]

The death rates in the Łódź ghetto were high, mainly due to hunger, disease, and severe cold, resulting in the death of about one-fifth of its population.[14] The question that arises is how Zelkowicz's perception of death changed, considering his deep interest in death even before the war, when living in a place where death was extremely common.

Urban death: In the ghetto prior to the deportations

In the encyclopedia of the ghetto that was compiled during the war by the ghetto archivists, the entry "Zgony w Getcie" [Deaths in the Ghetto] notes that "the link between mortality and nutrition is clear: with every change in the amount of supply, the death rate increases almost immediately (as early as that month)."[15] The first two years in the ghetto were initially

[13] Archive of the Ghetto Fighters' House [henceforth: GFH], Central Record Section, 70. Singer's words were translated by Deirdre Burke, "Attitudes toward Death during the Holocaust: Writings from the Ghettos," in Eric J. Sterling (ed.), *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Syracuse, 2005), 180.

[14] Michal Unger, *Lodz, aḥaron ha-geta'ot be-Polin* (Jerusalem, 2005), 557; Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto: A History* (Bloomington, 2006), 219. Of the ghetto population, 204,800 people in total, 43,743 died in the ghetto, 15,000 were deported to labor camps, 80,000 to Chełmno, and 67,000 to Auschwitz.

[15] The Archive of Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw [henceforth: ŻIH], 205\349, 205\350; *Encyklopedia getta. Niedokończony projekt archiwistów z getta łódzkiego*, ed. by Adam Sitarek, Ewa Wiatr et al. (Łódź, 2014).

characterized by the impoverishment of the residents and subsequently by mass mortality. In reviewing this period, I will discuss two pieces by Zelkowicz, examining his perception of death: "The Ghetto Apartments" and "By the Power of Faith."

Due to the severe hunger, employees of the Jewish ghetto administration were sent to check ghetto residents' eligibility for support. Zelkowicz documented his visits to the ghetto apartments as a representative of the Jewish administration in a series of twenty-eight short stories entitled "The Ghetto Apartments." The stories were written, apparently, in the first year of the ghetto's existence, at a time when mass death already prevailed.[16]

Death plays a prominent role in the stories. The depiction of the first apartment includes a portrayal of the living conditions therein: "The bed is all but ruined. All the entrails have been taken out of it and it is emptied of all signs of humanity . . . (the) bedding . . . looks like pieces of meat from slaughtered horses . . . pieces of carcass." Among the sheets, "a shriveled and yellowed face stands out, covered in green mottled spots. From the face protrudes a bony nose that has turned blue and is like a tombstone over a collapsed and sunken grave." The bedding and the person in it constitute a vision of death. The story repeatedly uses the words "died," "almost dead," "bar-minan" [an epithet for the dead], and "corpse." Indeed, the apartments were a zone of death. Zelkowicz encountered death when visiting another family: "Zelta, died in February. Faybel—in March. Zeinbel—in March. Miriam—in June. Mendel—in August…". The series of deaths echoes Singer's statement about a kind of death unknown in Europe.

The visit to the third apartment opens with the statement:

> In the ghetto, Riva Bramson, we are supported by a dream, protected only by the wind. Only the official deaths are legal: there is not a single corpse who will be buried without an official death certificate detailing the cause of death. Only our lives are illogical and unnatural. Our life in the ghetto, Riva Bramson, is nothing but accidental.

Here we can discern an inversion. Life is the unnatural wonder, while death is still organized through registration. Despite the cynical words, it indicates control. In the Łódź ghetto, the Jewish authorities continued

[16] Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt* (Göttingen, 2006); Yad Vashem Archives [henceforth: YVA], O-34, 607. This file contains all the apartment stories discussed herein.

to bury the dead individually and not in a mass grave, even at the peak of mass mortality.[17]

Various customs accepted in society are part of the perception of death. In the thirteenth apartment, Zelkowicz saw two young girls wearing black beads and recognized that they were in mourning. The story about the twenty-fifth apartment explains that "they left you standing by the door without inviting you to sit down, because on the days of mourning guests are not invited inside. One is not moved by your arrival . . . because one must not show interest in any subject." Zelkowicz noticed the customs and traditions that were preserved despite the widespread death.

Failure to take proper care of the dead leads Zelkowicz to make a far-reaching statement in the story about the twenty-fourth apartment: "The entire course of Jewish thought changed completely under the pressure of the ghetto." This statement concerns the burial procedure:

> Wrapped in rags, a rotten board is placed under his back, which is often stolen from underneath in order to cook with it. . . . The grave is covered in a rush and in haste. . . . Who robbed the Jews of the respect toward death that they kept in their hearts for hundreds of years? Who is it that has so fundamentally changed their thoughts and inner character. Isn't it the ghetto?!

Zelkowicz also adds here a particularly painful statement:

> The ghetto, the great negation of culture and progress that humans have cultivated for hundreds of years, erased in a short time the boundaries between sacred and dishonorable, just as it erased the boundaries between mine and yours. Between what is allowed and what is forbidden, between what is decent and what is not decent.

In the two articles he wrote before the war, Zelkowicz describes at length the obligatory actions following a person's death. Indeed, the treatment of the dead from the moment of death until the burial enables a separation between life and death. According to Zelkowicz, compliance with these rules determines the quality of the Jewish community; this applies both before the war and in the ghetto.

The story "מיטן כח פֿון גלויבן" [By the Power of Faith] introduces a new theme into Zelkowicz's writing: Jewish sacrifice, discussed amidst the love story of Greber and Riva Bramson, who also appears in the apartment

[17] Unger, *Łódź*, 368.

stories.[18] Love, as natural as it may seem, is unusual in Zelkowicz's work, and therefore it is interesting that here the lovers discuss death.

Indeed, the couple debates whether sacrificing one's life gives meaning to death. Riva Bramson furiously attacks the term *kiddush ha-Shem* [Hebrew: To sanctify God's name, indicating a willingness to die to avoid transgressing the religious commandments], stating that, in the ghetto, there are "fresh, new, fluttering martyrs every day!" According to her, the call to sanctify God's name is a misreading of the ghetto reality and adheres to the concept of death as it was before the war, which could lead to bloodshed. Greber, upset by this, replies that, in the ghetto, blood was spilled anyway for no reason, continuing: "It makes a difference to the victim himself, Riva, whether he was sacrificed to a stone idol or for a God who lives and commands him to be sacrificed." This was a call to give meaning to death as part of the traditional concept of the sanctification of God's name. We discover here a new element and perhaps an expansion of Zelkowicz's perception of death: the attempt to give it meaning.

Zelkowicz, who was not religious, called for the sacrifice of life. He did so not for religious reasons but as a way to resist the German decrees. Death gave meaning to life. Perhaps here lies the key to understanding the gap between the "ghetto apartments" and the lovers' walk through the streets of the ghetto. The stories of the apartments describe the meaningless mass death from hunger and disease. In the stories that preceded the war, people also died for no reason: death emphasized the feeling that the Jewish minority had no way out, in addition expressing distress. "By the Power of Faith" is not a story about a heroic death but about a miserable and unnecessary death —it constitutes a desperate attempt to give meaning to the death of the masses.

Mass death: The deportations

At the end of 1941, deportations from the ghetto to the extermination camp of Chełmno began. By April 1942, 44,056 Jews had been deported. Between 4 and 15 May 1942, an additional 10,915 Jews were deported, most of them deportees from Western Europe who had been sent to the ghetto.[19]

[18] YVA, 241-900.
[19] Unger, *Łódź*, 264–265.

"בעקעריַען אין געטאָ" [Bakeries in the Ghetto] is a monograph concerning the production of bread by the Jewish community in Łódź from the German occupation in September 1939 to the summer of 1942.[20] Alongside detailed data regarding the challenges of bread production, it depicts the main events that occurred in the Jewish community of Łódź.

On 5 May 1942, Zelkowicz notes in his personal diary, "What is the mood among the 'foreign' Jews?" in addition to recording the steep increase in the price of bread on the black market. Zelkowicz analyzes the mortality of Western European Jews by looking at the price of bread and at the "merchants" who bought bread and illegally sold it to Western Jews in exchange for valuables. The deportation took place against the backdrop of the unstable relations between the deportees and the Polish Jews.

According to Zelkowicz's writings, there was no awareness of the purpose of the deportations. The monograph focuses on the well-known difficulties recorded by the ghetto archivists, such as the rising price of bread. In the first months of 1942, tens of thousands of Łódź Jews were deported. Based on "Bakeries in the Ghetto," it appears that the deportations at that time were disturbing yet unclear, not yet associated with murder. Rather, hunger was the most tangible threat.

The report "אינעם לאַגער פֿון אַלטעשיך" [The Old Shoes Warehouse] was written by Zelkowicz in the summer of 1943.[21] It tells the story of a workshop where the shoes and clothes of those deported from the ghetto were prepared for reuse. The opening of the report links the deportations to death, using the term "extermination": "In the fourth year of the war, the inhabitants of the ghetto were marked for doom and extermination" [אומקום און פֿאַרניכטונג]. The objects returned to the workshop for sorting contained important information:

> The clothes were sent back a week after the deportation . . . damaged by wind and a severe storm. Here and there, the clothes sometimes had small, round, artistic holes, which penetrated strongly, mainly in the area of the chest pocket. You could find shirts that were stained with blood, others only had small drops of blood on them.

The monograph "Bakeries in the Ghetto" was written as these events unfolded, while the report on the workshop was written about a year

[20] ŻIH, 205/602.
[21] YVA, 241-895.

later, and it reflects the subsequent, different understanding regarding the murderous ramifications of deportation. Indeed, in the later work, Zelkowicz directly connects deportation with death and, in the summer of 1943, there was an understanding that at least some of the deportees would be murdered.

"Days of Dread"

"אין יענע קאָשמאַרנע טעג" [Days of Dread] is a document that Zelkowicz penned during the deportation of September 1942.[22] Between 1 and 12 September, 15,685 Jews were violently deported, about a third of them children under the age of 15.[23] The description of the deportation as presented by Zelkowicz, his archive colleagues, and diaries written in the ghetto will be discussed here, seeking to discern whether Zelkowicz's writing was unique or the extent to which it reflects a broader perception of death.[24]

The ghetto residents gave different names to the deportation of September 1942. Oskar Singer calls it "The Great Hunt." In his diary entry for 4 September, Oskar Rosenfeld refers to it as "Resettling. Children and adults." Shlomo Frank writes in his diary about "the bloody evacuation." Zelkowicz describes it, as mentioned, using the words "in those terrible days," and like many of the ghetto residents he used the term *Sperre*, an

[22] "אין יענע קאָשמאַרנע טעג" [Days of Dread], YVA, JM-1157. Translations of the document into Hebrew and English cover the first five days of September 1942 and part of the sixth day, see Michal Unger (ed.), *Josef Zelkowicz: Bayamim ha-nora'im ha-hem. Reshimot me-geto Lodz* (Jerusalem, 1994), 299–310; a Polish translation of Zelkowicz's diary covers the days from 1 to 9 September, Monika Polit (ed.), *Notatki z getta łódzkiego 1941–1944* (Łódź, 2016), 149–287. In addition to reading the Hebrew, English, and Polish translations, I also followed the personal diary written in Yiddish (limited due to the poor condition of the manuscript), ŻIH, RG-302/111. The quotations from Zelkowicz's diary regarding the first to the fifth days and parts of the sixth day are from Unger, *Bayamim ha-nora'im ha-hem*. Since Zelkowicz's diary resumes only on 15 September, the days between 10 and 14 September are missing.

[23] Unger, *Łódź*, 299–310. The data is from p. 309.

[24] Oskar Singer, "Ha-matzod ha-gadol" [The Great Hunt], *Yedi'ot beit loḥamei hagetaot* [News of the Ghetto Fighters House] 21 (1959), 69–83; Oskar Rosenfeld wrote in his diary about each day of the deportation. Oskar Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto: Notebooks from Łódź – Oskar Rosenfeld*, ed. by Hanno Loewy, trans. Brigitte Goldstein (Evanston, 2002), 119–130. Excerpts were taken from Shlomo Frank's diary, Shlomo Frank, *Togbuch fun Lodzer ghetto* (Tel Aviv, 1958). The chronicle of the Łódź ghetto includes a review of the September deportation after its conclusion, the description is similar to the text of "In Those Terrible Days," and, therefore, I assume it was written by Zelkowicz. See Arie Ben Menachem, Josef Varav (eds.), *Ha-khronika shel geto Lodz* [Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto] (Jerusalem, 1987), 2:220–228 and also footnote no. 53.

abbreviation of the German term for "curfew," referencing the curfew that was imposed during the deportation. This multiplicity of terms, something absent from descriptions of earlier deportations, demonstrates the intensity of the event and a different awareness of its meaning. It was a particularly violent deportation, and the circle of writers found themselves in danger.

On Tuesday, 1 September 1942, at 7:00 a.m., the evacuation of the hospitals in the ghetto began. At first, the evacuation was received with indifference, but the realization that a deportation was underway created increasing panic because there had been two previous deportations of patients with no idea of their fate. Zelkowicz writes, "[E]veryone felt that the blood froze in their veins . . . the horror of the situation penetrated in all its severity into everyone's consciousness." Oskar Rosenfeld adds details about the interruption of surgery, the deportation of a mother an hour after she gave birth, and cases of suicide. Zelkowicz later writes that "anyone who is unable to work will be thrown into the waste." The possibility that the hospital patients were sent to their deaths first appeared as an allusion, through the use of the word "waste," and later directly: "(They) want to see the patient again, maybe it will make it easier for him and us to accept **death**" (emphasis added). It was the first day of the deportation, and death was present in Zelkowicz's writing even before the first casualties.

Three days after the evacuation of the hospitals, Zelkowicz notes in his diary that the rumor about the deportation of the elderly and children was in fact a decision made at a meeting attended by the Jewish leader of the ghetto, Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski: "The deportation of the elders and children is a fact." A few lines later he states, "No one has any doubt that those sent from the ghetto are not sent anywhere, they are led to destruction, at least the old ones. . . . Like sick birds, they are destined for slaughter." The term "slaughter" is part of the terminology of death: not death from hunger, cold, or disease, but a new kind of death for the inhabitants of the ghetto.

Zelkowicz records in detail the speech that Rumkowski gave on Friday, 4 September, in which he called for people to hand over their children: "My brothers and sisters, give them to me!" The gathering is described by Zelkowicz as communal and the "audience," "mothers," and "fathers" behaves uniformly and reacts painfully together, a united community that suffers severe blows. Zelkowicz repeats the term "waste," noting: "A pile of 'waste' . . . not to be buried in a Jewish grave and not to leave any trace,

any sign, behind them!" The phrase indicates the humiliation of this death: the people are ejected as waste. Oskar Singer also records that thinking about the fate of the deportees is "from the realm of horror. Everyone is certain that the deported Jews will be murdered."

On Saturday, 5 September, the deportation began at "the nursing home, where there is no one (to) help them," and it was more difficult when "children are torn from their parents, a husband from his wife, and a wife from her husband." Zelkowicz explains how the deportation was carried out: the Jewish police and the German forces close in on a house yard or a group of houses, a shot is fired into the air, the inhabitants ordered to report to the yard within two minutes and to line up. Singer adds that the Germans remove "from the ranks the sick, the weaklings, the swollen and the exhausted. . . . The sorting of the 'material'." The word "material" is equivalent to the term "waste" in describing people whose fate has already been sealed.

Zelkowicz describes the fate of Blima'le, the daughter of his friend Simcha Bonim Shayewicz, who lived in Łódź before the war and was part of a group of writers and poets who met together with Zelkowicz at the home of the poet Miriam Olinover: "A girl aged six to eight years old. Her father was a Jewish poet."[25] Shayewicz had gone out to look for food when the Germans arrived and took his wife along with Blima'le and her little sister, who "didn't yet have a name, at 10 in the morning she was exactly 33 hours old."

On 6 September, the Germans arrived at the homes of Zelkowicz, Singer, and Rosenfeld. Singer, who lived in the same building as Zelkowicz, writes, "Here comes our turn." Zelkowicz describes in his diary how members of one family sat and waited: "And you have nothing to say to them. You yourself are young and you have a work certificate in your hand that proves you are a useful citizen in the ghetto." Zelkowicz was born in 1898, making him forty-four years old at that time, and it is likely that he had a work permit allowing him to work in the ghetto archive. "Your wife is also young and her work certificate is perfectly fine." Sara, Zelkowicz's wife, born in 1900, was then forty-two years old, also under the age designated for deportation. "Younger than the two of you is your son, fourteen years old, already working. He is tall and thin, with a handsome face and an upright stature." The couple had a son named

[25] Chava Rozenfarb, "Simcha Bunim Shayewicz (Dermonungen) [References]," *Di Goldene Kayt* 131 (1991), 9–27.

Shmuel.[26] Zelkowicz does not indicate that this is his own family and addresses the reader in the second person "you." This indirect text is the only description of his family in the ghetto. Only the *Sperre* caused him to break away from a principle to which he adhered very strictly: writing about his community but not about his family or himself.

The writers debate the goal of the deportation and whether it was death. On 6 September, Oskar Rosenfeld writes: "The ghetto does not give an answer as to why, when, and where they are sent." Zelkowicz asks a similar question on the same day: "When the deceased is taken out of his house, they accompany him on his last journey and see where his body is buried." The deportees were already "deceased" even before they were murdered.

Worries concerning deportation for the purpose of extermination appear on 8 September, when Zelkowicz addresses the rumors of murder, "פֿאַרגאַזעוועט אָדער פֿאַרברענט ווי מען שמועסט" [gassing or burning, as they say], and, on the same page, the words gassing and burning appear once more.[27] Zelkowicz offers his interpretation:

> You don't need to gas them or burn them immediately. It is enough just to catch them and take them out of the ghetto. How will a small child survive without his mother? He will die. And an old man who has nowhere to lay his head? The same thing will happen to a patient, the healthy, and also those who will remain in the ghetto.

The fate of the deportees becomes clearer to Zelkowicz over the course of the deportation.

On Saturday, 12 September, Singer depicts the end of the curfew. Sunday, the second day of the Jewish New Year, was a "frightened holiday." The children who were not deported returned to their homes for an emotional meeting with their mothers, accompanied by "bereaved mothers who have lost their sanity." Four days later, Singer writes, "the disaster is over, how will the poor and miserable Jewish city in the heart of Europe overcome it?"[28] On 15 September, Zelkowicz records in his diary:

> Life in the ghetto has returned to normal, as they say. From the outside, it seems as usual, but it is only a superficial impression. From the outside, the wound has

[26] The dates of birth are taken from the "Prisoner's Certificates" from the Łódź Ghetto, YVA, 4683723.

[27] ŻIH, 8 Sept. 1942, RG-302/111.

[28] Oskar Singer, GFH, 12.575.

> healed, but inside, the blood is seeping and it is not known if it will ever stop. People go to work . . . and talk about the next deportation.

After September 1942, there were almost no further deportations until the liquidation of the ghetto in the summer of 1944. The food supply in 1943 was better than it had been in the first two years, albeit still too little and irregular. In this year, tuberculosis was the main cause of death.[29] Death became the "death of the ghetto," death due to the terrible living conditions.

Thoughts about the *Sperre*

The deportation of September 1942 differed from the deportations conducted in the first half of that year in terms of the violence used by the Germans, the targeting of the children and the elderly, and, as is apparent from the writings of the ghetto residents, the partial understanding that the fate of the deportees was death. A fundamental difference in relation to the intellectual circle was the direct threat they faced. The Germans had reached the people closest to Zelkowicz.

Zelkowicz's writing throughout the ghetto days was constant and stable. As an employee of the archive from shortly after its foundation until the liquidation of the ghetto, he wrote daily for the Chronicle, kept a detailed diary, and penned stories and reports. His deep commitment to documentation is well known, and it also seems that writing was a safe haven for him. Even during the days of deportation, he continued writing, and every day he recorded the events in great detail. Yet there are no diary entries for the days between 10 and 14 September 1942. One possibility is that the missing pages were lost or mutilated, like quite a few other pages from his diary, but I believe otherwise. Zelkowicz stopped writing. The prolific writer who produced an enormous oeuvre in the ghetto and had not stopped writing since his imprisonment therein, was unable to write for these five days as the dramatic events continued.

Writing in a time of catastrophe forces the writer to confront loss and death, but behind all this is the danger of what Amos Goldberg calls the writer's "symbolic death."[30] This death is not only biological death or

[29] Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto*, 211.

[30] Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing during the Holocaust* (Indiana, 2017), 76.

the threat of death but "in the course of this process, the symbolic fabric that constitutes what is known as 'reality' unravels and is destroyed."[31] Instead of the normal way of life, in which death is part of the circle of life, the organization of reality collapses. Indeed, writes Goldberg, "When the shock is so great, not only is it impossible to find the appropriate words with which to represent it but language as a whole is paralyzed and the power of speech is completely lost."[32] The writer is under extreme pressure. Zelkowicz faced death throughout his life in the ghetto, but, during these days, he probably found it impossible to give expression to the ghetto reality. As he stood helpless, facing the threat of his "symbolic death," writing was no longer useful. The burden of events in those days caused him to stop writing and only on 15 September did he once again take up his pen.

The manner in which the dead were buried was a crucial issue for Zelkowicz throughout the days of September 1942, even though most of the killing did not take place in the ghetto itself. Until the war, Zelkowicz's perception of death was based on a clear ordering of the transition between life and death through strict adherence to language and customs. In the ghetto, the continuity in his writing about death is evident, but, in the dramatic days of September, it disintegrated. The word "waste," mentioned in the context of the deportees' fate, does not appear in the writer's description of the mass mortality in the apartments of the needy because they were buried in the ghetto cemetery. Zelkowicz wrote about death in the ghetto, a large-scale death that affected many families, and described it using literary tools similar to those employed to portray deaths in the prewar Bałuty district. During the deportations, Zelkowicz wrote about an unknown death that occurred outside the ghetto and shook the foundations of the existing perception of death.

In the two articles on the topic that Zelkowicz penned before the war, the burial process was a central element. Death received the respect it deserved as a major community event. The fear of a meaningless death appeared in the story of Greber and Riva Bramson, where the writer attempted to give meaning to death. Life in the first two years after the closure in the ghetto was miserable, but the deportations of September 1942 completely eroded the dignity of death.

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 77.

Conclusion

Zelkowicz's early works, especially the series "In the Houses of Bałuty," indicate his ongoing interest in death. Indeed, even before the war, death was a central theme in his writings. The ghetto threatened the patterns created before the war. However, it seems that, even when facing mass death from starvation, Zelkowicz's perception of death continued to follow the lines determined before the war. The deportation of September 1942 challenged his views: he understood, even if only partially, that mass murder was underway, and therefore the basic concept of death was disrupted.

This article has examined the relationship between the two corpora of his writings: the corpus penned in the interwar period and the corpus from the ghetto. Despite the substantial differences between the two periods, lines of continuity are evident in Zelkowicz's depictions of death. Sometimes, the continuity is partial, but its very existence, even in the sharp transition to the extreme reality in the ghetto, testifies to the great power of the patterns that were formed before the war. In particular, this highlights the importance of research regarding those patterns to improve our understanding of the ghetto period. Zelkowicz perceived the transition to the ghetto as maintaining relative continuity and wrote about life in the ghetto as a continuation, albeit *in extremis*, of life in the city of Łódź before World War II.

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