Conclusion

> All I should like to have in life at the present moment is plenty to eat … a "Gettonian" [ghetto man] when deprived of half a loaf of bread suffers more terribly than if his own parents had died.
>
> – Anonymous boy, writing on May 15, 1944, in the margins of *Les Vrais Riches*[1]

I end with a quote from the same anonymous author with whom I began this book. This book has, above all, privileged the voice of the victims as the central focus of the text and informants of their own experience inside the ghetto walls. The terrible feelings he ascribes to a ghetto dweller – a "Gettonian" – depict the latter stages of victims of famine and famine genocide. This anonymous writer had himself lived through the *atrocity of hunger*. He knew both the pain of food deprivation and the anguish of losing a parent, having lost his father to starvation in the ghetto. Ten days earlier, hunger had driven him to steal half a loaf of his own sister's bread.[2] At that time, half a loaf of bread was more than half a week's bread ration and its loss threatened his sister's life. He had contended with his own hunger, succumbed to temptation, and felt a deep sense of guilt born of his food theft and having to watch how his sister struggled with the hunger and suffering his actions caused. The *atrocity of hunger* in the ghetto was not just the physical and mental distress of food deprivation. It was also the anguish of losing friends and family, witnessing the starvation of loved ones, and engaging in, observing, or being victim to survival strategies that fundamentally challenged one's deeply held values.

The anonymous writer began his diary in the margins of the novel *Les Vrais Riches* a few weeks before trains began departing to the Chelmno death camp as part of the final liquidation of the Łódź ghetto. The ghetto had been sealed four years earlier, in May 1940, making it the longest lasting sealed ghetto. Everyone who survived until the end of the ghetto's existence – particularly those who had been there since 1940 or 1941 – had at least one attribute in common: they had somehow been able to obtain sufficient food over a period of years to avoid

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death by starvation. Each had managed to obtain food in excess of what was available per individual ghetto dweller, whether through privileged work assignments, family or social connections, sufficient assets to sell off, or theft. In many cases, people drew on several or all of these methods to survive.

We do not know if the anonymous writer survived the war. His diary, which includes an entry from the ghetto dated after the last deportations from the Łódź ghetto to the death camp Chelmno, indicates that he had a chance of survival.[3] However, we do know that he was starving at the time his diary ends in August 1944, which likely impaired his chance of making it past a selection at Auschwitz or surviving much longer in Łódź as one of those left behind to clean up the ghetto. Upon arriving at the remnants of the ghetto on January 19, 1945, the Red Army found only 877 Jewish survivors.

This book examines survival during the Holocaust. Obtaining sufficient food during the ghetto period before deportation was not enough to survive the war. If one could not escape the ghetto and successfully go into hiding, something that was in any case more possible in Warsaw and Kraków, it was necessary to survive in the ghetto long enough to avoid the mass deportations to Chelmno, Treblinka, and Belzec from Łódź, Kraków, and Warsaw, respectively. This meant that surviving the Holocaust required having enough food and protection to avoid those early deportations. For Jews in Warsaw, deportation after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to Majdanek or another concentration camp required finding enough food not only during the time of the ghetto, but also during the four weeks of the uprising when no rations were distributed. Those from Kraków needed to survive until March 1943, then be selected for entry to Płaszów or Auschwitz, and then make it through the rest of the war. Those from Łódź needed to survive the ghetto until August 1944 to have been placed on a transport to Auschwitz or another labor camp instead of the death camp Chelmno.

In the case of the anonymous writer, although he is quite hungry as he relentlessly records in the margins of *Les Vrais Riches*, he was likely not starving for the entirety of the ghetto period. He was unlikely to have survived so many years with such extreme hunger. For many individuals in the ghettos, obtaining sufficient food was not possible for the full duration of the ghetto period. Instead, they slowly moved from food insecurity to starvation. This erosion in food access took place at different rates of speed in different ghettos and among different social strata whose powerful connections or positions and/or tradable assets enabled them to hold out the longest against starvation. To last as long as he did in the ghetto, the anonymous writer likely had been able to draw on material

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resources that were exhausted by the last few months in the ghetto, leaving him to rely entirely on his insufficient rations. But those who avoided death by starvation in the ghettos still had to survive by one means or another through the remainder of the war after the ghetto period. Having enough to eat in the ghetto affected one's later survival not only because it ensured longevity during the ghetto period, but also because the well-fed arrived at concentration camps with a distinct advantage of at least looking more capable of work. To a significant extent, then, the story of who could have access to food in the ghettos is a critical piece of the story of who survived the Holocaust and why.

By focusing on times when Jews in the ghetto either had food or faced starvation, this book has explored how Jews and Jewish communities exercised agency and coped – successfully or unsuccessfully – with the *atrocity of hunger*. Although individual vulnerability to hunger varied, acquiring adequate food for survival usually involved the presence of several intersecting factors: real assets that could be traded for food; labor (licit or illicit) that was valued in the ghetto economy; social networks with which to secure a position and protection; illegal food acquisition; and residence in a ghetto where those attributes were useful. Usually one of these, particularly a valuable trade skill, was not sufficient alone.

In addition to providing a victim-centered history of Jewish experience during the war, this book contributes to the emerging scholarship on genocidal famine. Trading assets to obtain food is a common feature of famine genocides. Those experiencing extreme hunger will often trade away all of their assets even until they exchange items needed for their future survival. Movable wealth proved the key means to access food over the long duration of the ghettos' existence. While various factors could contribute to an individual's access to such wealth, it was unquestionably the most important means to long-term food security in the ghettos.

The buying power of assets, however, depended on location. It is in examining the differences in location that this book contributes to the variable levels of hunger and the ways in which place impacts survival. Inside the ghetto, valuables traded at a much lower value than they did outside the ghetto walls. Inside a refugee center, their value was even lower. Warsaw and Kraków provided more opportunities for ghetto dwellers to trade valuables outside the ghetto walls, where they could purchase more. Unlike the Jews in Łódź, who used the ghetto's own currency, those in Warsaw and Kraków earned money that had buying power both inside and outside of the ghetto walls. However, the currency went much further outside the ghetto. It is for that reason that as the

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ability to trade outside the ghetto walls became increasingly restricted, more of the ghetto population began to experience starvation.

For most in the ghetto, however, access to adequate food over the span of the ghetto simply proved impossible. As increasing hunger led to starvation, many ghetto dwellers employed various coping mechanisms. Many of these techniques involved challenging their own and their community's core values. These transformations of individuals and society, hallmarks of the *atrocity of hunger*, ranged from acceptable foods to consume to gendered behavior to criminality to sacrificing the weakest populations.

The adaptation of expanding what can and even should be eaten in a society undergoing the *atrocity of hunger* is typical of extreme famine situations. Within the spectrum of what became tolerable, and even desirable, was a range of foods considered unacceptable before the war. In homes and in the communities at large, food waste was transformed into edible products, whether it be potato peels for a ghetto salad or homemade food patties. Ersatz coffee was transformed into cakes, cookies, and brickettes that were served as meals. Non-kosher food, a taboo for many in the population, was consumed and even became part of the standard rations. In this manner, religious Jews had another dimension added to their experience of adapting to the famine conditions. All of the starving, however, ate things that were not part of their prewar diet. Some things were not consumables at all, including grass, wall plaster, and motor oil. In the most extreme situations, a few rare cases of cannibalism took place in the Warsaw Ghetto. All of these phenomena of consuming hunger foods, eating non-foods, and even cannibalism are features in other famine genocides.

Gender roles are another area where the exigencies of ghetto life and the need to obtain adequate nutrition fundamentally challenged prewar values. Many scholars have looked to gender in famine situations to differentiate between how men and women have approached coping mechanisms and survival strategies. Non-wage earning tasks such as food preparation, food processing, and food procurement and scavenging have all been viewed as women's work during famine by various scholars. However, in the case of the ghettos, it is clear that men, women, and particularly children engaged in all of these duties. These tasks became less those of a specific gender and more the responsibility of the unemployed within a household. Whether it was cleaning, sewing, or dragging sewage through the streets, both men and women took jobs that were gender-specific before the war, because the protection from deportation that a job – any job – afforded was vital. The requirements of physical survival forced changes and

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challenges to prewar gender norms with the needs for survival often overriding gendered positions within households.

Even so, the consumption of previously inedible food and the challenges to gender norms were not evenly distributed amongst the ghetto economic classes. Privileged households could maintain prewar eating habits and gender roles longer. The most elite households had some deprivations compared to their prewar life but continued to eat foods eaten before the war. And in them, a woman still tended to take care of the domestic sphere. They were insulated from many aspects of the *atrocity of hunger*. In their roles as witnesses, they not only recorded the metamorphoses of others. They were themselves also transformed through co-existence with the starving. Many were moved to help those who had become famished but only enough to not risk their own survival. All famines and famine genocides typically feature such a group that manages to protect itself from starvation while co-existing with those who hunger. But sometimes, after depleting their resources, they too joined the ranks of the famished.

Widespread criminality – particularly food theft and smuggling – was another means by which prewar values were transformed during the ghetto period. Whereas prior to the war these activities were deplored, the need to obtain sufficient food and avoid starvation normalized them in the ghetto. Hunger and the need for nutrition often overrode pre-ghetto morality and lead individuals to steal, prostitute themselves, and engage in other scorned and illegal behaviors. Sometimes, as was the case with the anonymous writer at the beginning of this chapter, people even committed criminal acts against their own families, even if they did so with guilt and shame. In his short story collection *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Tadeusz Borowski, a non-Jewish Polish survivor of Auschwitz, noted of Holocaust victims, "We said there is no crime a man will not commit in order to save himself."[4] Certainly for the Jews of the ghettos, and those in other famines and genocide famines, illicit activity was critical for survival.

One of the biggest challenges that the *atrocity of hunger* posed to morality concerned the various ways it led families and communities to sacrifice the weak. In families, this could take the form of child abandonment, desertion by an adult family member to focus on their own survival, or neglect of elderly family members. While the gendered expectations that women nurture their families and men provide for them persisted, men and women alike sometimes abandoned children, stole food from family members, or left their families to survive. The drive for survival could override these expected behaviors. Conversely, these same gender norms and prewar moral expectations prevailed in some cases. In spite of their

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own hunger, mothers and fathers sometimes sacrificed themselves to provide food for their families. Similarly, communities struggled to support the most vulnerable. Many began the war providing for the old, sick, and orphans. Ultimately, however, the community's survival meant sacrificing the old, the sick, and the youngest children. It is not unusual in famines and genocide famines for the youngest, oldest, and sickest to perish. This desperate form of triage whereby some of the most vulnerable individuals are sacrificed for the benefit of others is a significant feature of the *atrocity of hunger*.

As a genocide whose horrors include mass murder through bullets, gas chambers, and death marches, the Holocaust also featured another brutal form: the *atrocity of hunger*. The gruesome mass killings at death camps rendered its power as an executioner less visible, as did the evolving nature of famine. But the effects were the same. As the essence of famine genocides, the *atrocity of hunger* does not just decimate populations through starvation. It also transforms families, communities, and individuals as the need for physical survival struggles in conflict with identity markers and values.

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