

***The Doctors of the Warsaw Ghetto.***

**By Maria Ciesielska.**

**Edited by Tali Nates, Jeanette Friedman, and Luc Albinski.**

**Translated by Agata Krzyczylkiewicz.**

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**Chayyim Holtkamp**

*The Doctors of the Warsaw Ghetto*, by Maria Ciesielska, is a thorough text, looking into the more than 700 Jewish doctors from the Warsaw Ghetto, fitting their story into a broader historical context of before and after the foundation of the ghetto itself. The author describes the intention of her text as showing that Jewish doctors in the Warsaw Ghetto created a professional healthcare system in the face of horrific conditions that served against the health of the ghetto, while still being able to provide access to medical care and even conduct scientific research. Some questions she asks are:

How was the healthcare system for the Jewish population organized after the outbreak of the Second World War and how did it change after the gates to the ghetto were closed in 1940? How many doctors worked in the ghetto, and what was their fate? How were polyclinics in the ghetto organized to provide help for outpatients? Were hospitals established in the ghetto? How were treatments provided in existing healthcare institutions? Were doctors involved in tasks other than their primary duties? (3)

The finding is that Jewish doctors of the Warsaw Ghetto were able to remain doctors and provide healthcare to the individuals who needed it in the dire circumstances that surrounded them.

The book methodically follows the chronology of the ghetto, as it explains the pre-ghetto situation, culminating in the eventual fates of the Warsaw Ghetto and its inhabitants after liquidation. Ciesielska begins her text with a discussion of Polish Jews before the ghettos, followed by an introduction to the prewar healthcare scene in Poland, including the education of doctors in Poland. She provides a relevant commentary about ‘bench ghettos’, a term which denotes the benches where Jewish medical students had to sit in classrooms while receiving their education in prewar Poland. Through this anecdote, she shows that, undoubtedly, antisemitism did not begin with the Holocaust itself, but rather fits into a historical context of pan-Poland anti-Jewish sentiment.

An extensive discussion of the historical context up to the formation of the Warsaw Ghetto is provided, including the healthcare situation prior to the formation of the ghetto and after the 1939 siege on Warsaw.



In Chapter 6, Ciesielska begins her discussion of doctors and medical care in the Warsaw Ghetto. She describes the conditions in which the nearly 800 doctors were forced to work, including in the hospitals and pharmacies. There is discussion about mental health in the ghetto, and the fact that suicide was an increasing phenomenon, although not considered rampant. Usually in response to depression or despair, suicide also occurred as a result of being called to work in a labour or concentration camp. This develops into a discussion of the threat of labour camps which loomed over the people of the ghetto before what the author calls the ‘Great Deportation’. She does an excellent job of explaining the conditions of life in the Warsaw Ghetto, the horrible circumstances which surrounded the Jewish people living in the ghetto: hunger, cramped spaces, malnutrition, and epidemics. Ciesielska paints a picture of squalor and unsanitary conditions, made worse by limited space. The setting was made worse by a lack of food, clothing, water, and soap.

Chapter 7 is entitled “The Great Deportation (*Grossaktion*)”. It covers the events leading up to the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, including the murders and hostage-taking situations. As Ciesielska states, approximately 400,000 Jews were living in the ghetto, an area of about 1.3 square miles, at the time of deportation, which began on 23 July 1942 and ended on 21 September of the same year. These dates had holy significance for the Jews: 23 July was *Tisha B’Av*, which commemorates the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and 21 September was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement and holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Bribed with promises of better food and more rations, nearly 7,000 Jews a day were packed into cattle cars headed for Treblinka. Part of Ciesielska’s discussion of the Great Deportation is what happened to the remaining hospitals in the ghetto, and the relocations those hospitals were forced to undergo.

Chapter 10 is an excellent resource on Jewish resistance by the medical fraternities. Ciesielska writes,

With the Germans determined to dehumanize and humiliate the Jews in the ghetto, preventing intellectual, artistic, and spiritual activities, anyone or any group involved in lifting people out of their misery practiced a form of resistance to the German onslaught on their souls and bodies. That included learning Torah and praying, educating children, putting together theatrical performances and night club acts, and in the case of the doctors, creating an underground medical school. (222)

Running the underground medical school involved an elaborate setup, including lecturers, who were paid based on the fees that were obtained from lecture participants. The halls were unheated and lacked proper lighting, thus lamps were utilised. Ciesielska states that more than 40 professors and doctors participated in the underground medical school, with nearly 200 participants

attending the lectures. This is a great testament to the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto, beyond the Uprising itself.

A huge component of the book, comprising nearly half of the whole book, is the appendices. The first appendix is a list of Jewish doctors who were arrested and held hostage in 1940 following Andrzej Kott's escape from the Gestapo. There are lists of non-Aryan doctors in the Warsaw Ghetto, including different time periods in which these doctors worked. The most detailed appendix is that of the Jewish doctors working and living in Warsaw in 1940-42. Last, there is a list of teachers of medicine in the ghetto. Ciesielska also includes upwards of 70 pictures of doctors, nurses, and pharmacists in the appendices, which include some 20 female doctors. This provides researchers and academics with more valuable information about the Warsaw Ghetto and its medical personnel.

Steeped in citations and references, this is thoroughly researched work. Heavily utilising the resources of Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH) and Warsaw-Białystok Medical Chamber, Ciesielska creates a comprehensive analysis of the doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, and other medical practitioners and professionals of the ghetto, that kept Jews alive despite epidemics, malnutrition, and cramped living spaces. There are discussions of specific doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and hospitals, including their fates and pre-ghetto activities. This work achieves its goal of showing how doctors and other medical professionals continued to provide medical care within the ghetto by utilising a myriad of primary sources.

Maria Ciesielska's specialty is in family medicine and the history of medicine. This work clearly fits into her wheelhouse and expertise as a discussion of medical practice and the professionals of the Warsaw Ghetto. Suited best for professional historians of medicine and the Holocaust, this book successfully achieves its goal of showing how doctors and other medical practitioners of the Warsaw Ghetto not only survived but allowed their altruistic actions to encourage the survivorship of others. In doing so, it answers the aforementioned questions about the Warsaw Ghetto. While there are other recent publications on the Warsaw Ghetto and the medical personnel who worked there, *The Doctors of the Warsaw Ghetto* is a great addition to the existing literature on the Warsaw Ghetto and Jewish medical resistance.