

5: Modesty

Since the Middle Ages, numerous charitable institutions have been in operation in Warsaw. Hospitals, serving the role of almshouses for the poor, disabled, elderly, and orphans rather than of medical facilities, were the most important charitable institutions. Their funding came from endowments by founders, donations from more affluent city residents, and alms. Most of these institutions were managed by the municipal authorities.

The oldest hospital in Warsaw was the New Town's St. Spirit Hospital, founded before 1388. It is also the one for which the most written records have survived. Other important institutions included the Holy Virgin Mary Hospital on Przyrynek Street in the New Town, established in 1411, and the St. Spirit Almshouse *intra muros* on Piwna Street. The latter, founded by Princess Anna Bolesławówna in 1442, was better endowed than the others, with amenities such as fishponds, orchards, and a mill, and was aimed at a somewhat better clientele.

Overall, several such institutions operated simultaneously in Warsaw, each accommodating between a few and several dozen people, mostly elderly women. Admission to these hospitals was not easy due to limited spaces, and impoverished residents constituted a high percentage of the city's total population. Often, hospital administrators required an 'entry fee' from residents, and the support of a candidate by the City Magistrate was also significant.

The modern concept of caring for impoverished residents involved providing them with modest yet hunger-satisfying food. Hospitals had their own kitchens and pantries. The hospital food typically included bread and meat (served 3-4 times a week), as well as groats, dumplings, peas, sauerkraut or fresh cabbage, turnips, carrots, and occasionally onions, cucumbers, mustard, and pickled beets. Dishes were seasoned with bacon or butter, and during fasting periods, with flaxseed oil. During these times, residents were also fed inexpensive salted herring, as well as sour rye soup and borscht. The main beverage was low-alcohol beer. During holidays, the menu included better quality meat and fish, eggs, cakes, and dried fruits. The exhibition features a weekly menu from 1598 from the St. Spirit Hospital located outside the city walls.

In addition to the hospitals run by the municipality, Warsaw had charitable fraternities composed of wealthy burghers, merchants, craftsmen, nobility, and clergy, including both women and men. The most significant was the Warsaw Brotherhood of Mercy, founded in 1590, which established its own hospital dedicated to St. Lazarus. Food for the residents primarily came from gardens and land donated by benefactors. The Brotherhood also hosted an annual meal for the poor on Holy Wednesday or Thursday and sometimes provided regular food aid to individuals, e.g. the impoverished burgher Anna Funkowa. The City Magistrate also supported sick and poor residents with alms in the form of food—bread, beer, and occasionally meat—in cases of plague or famine. Additionally, the so-called ‘funeral dinners’, often specified in the wills of wealthier burghers, served as post-funeral feasts for a number of poor people.

The conditions for charitable institutions in Warsaw remained largely unchanged until the second half of the 18th century.

From 1814, the Warsaw Charity Society became the most important philanthropic institution in the capital, with members including wealthy burghers and aristocrats. In the 1840s, the Society distributed 150 portions of Rumford soup daily to the city’s poorest residents and sold affordable ‘5-grosh’ meals. In the second half of the 19th century, the Society established a network of cheap kitchens for those without cooking facilities or unable to afford more expensive dining options. By the end of the 19th century, the Society was assisting around 100,000 people annually. Today, Warsaw has several free meal programs for those in need, operated by non-governmental organizations, church groups, and local government units.

Among the exhibits in this room, it is worth noting the projected photographs depicting the interiors of cheap kitchens, inns, and tea houses in Warsaw in 1915. These images are part of a larger collection documenting the activities of the City of Warsaw Citizens’ Committee. The photos come from the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw and consist of over 300 glass negatives in the 18x24 cm format. This collection documents the Committee’s activities in 1915, including images of the headquarters of various sections and the aid facilities organized by the Committee—kitchens, inns, shelters, children’s homes, stores, etc.

The only author known by name is Jan Piszczatowski; identities of the other contributors remain unidentified. The documentary photographs depict both the dining areas of cheap kitchens with people eating, and the kitchen staff and interiors. The Committee ran kitchens for various social groups—for intellectuals, labourers, artists, as well as for children and infant feeding stations.

The modest kitchen of the working-class during the interwar period is also depicted in a drawing by Henryk Grzybowski, who was associated with pre-war Bródno district. The drawing, titled “People in Line for the Kitchen for the Poor and Unemployed”, from 1955, provides a visual as well as descriptive account of the kitchen’s operations.

“Kitchen for the poor and the unemployed on 11 Listopada Street. In the years 1927/28/29 I used to walk from N. Bródno to get soup. Mother [...] was sick. The route from Nadwiślańska Street was over 5-6 km one way. I had no money for the tram. [...] The kitchen was located in the basement of a building that still stands today. It typically prepared pea soup with bacon, bean soup with dumplings, cabbage soup, and sometimes had pieces of cracklings floating on top. Additionally, I received a portion of bread for each member of the family. The line of people waiting to be served soup was around 100 individuals.”

This section of the exhibition focuses on food during times of crises and wars, illustrated by photographs of kitchens taken by an anonymous photographer in a transit camp for Warsaw’s displaced population during and after the Warsaw Uprising. This camp, located in Pruszków, was in operation from 6 August 1944 until 16 January 1945.