

Balagan

Categories: Phenomena

An expression of Turkic origin meaning something mobile, rootless. Adopted by Yiddish from Polish, where the word originally described a traveling circus and its lowbrow performances. Later, Polish “bałagan” came to mean all things makeshift, tacky and in poor taste.

In Yiddish, the word balegan retained that meaning and later formed the basis for the verb “baleganevn” used to describe making a mess, doing something sloppily or clowning around.

A trashy, cheap and lowbrow theater or an untidy restaurant is called “balegan”. Poor performance, mediocre painting or inferior writing is described as “baleganeven”.

In the ghetto’s unique conditions, the noun’s meaning changed. It was used not only to describe the state of general disorder in the ghetto, but also a special kind of chaos and confusion observed at distribution points and among people waiting in lines.

The word “balegan” meant the front of such a line, comprised of a whole cluster of people crowding the entrance to the distribution point or at the counter window of the ration cards collection office.

Typically, a “balegan” is created in the following way: several hours before the distribution point opens, people start gathering in front of it, hoping to pick up their rations as quickly as possible. One by one, they join the waiting line. They stand in it until so-called “tough guys” (vide “Mocni”) or “usurpers” show up just before opening time. “Tough guys” push out those standing closest to the entrance or counter windows and take their places at the head of the line. “Usurpers” in turn, citing some “witnesses”, take over the best places, claiming that they had reserved them earlier. Those who are pushed out of the line refuse to go to the end and gather around the front, thus starting to form a “balegan”, which later proceeds to storm the door of a “cooperative” or an office counter.

Of course, joining the “balegan” by that point are people who do not feel like waiting in the line at all. Whenever there is a waiting line in the ghetto, “balegan” follows, from its beginning until its very end.

“To arrive with balegan” means “to slip” into the crowd at the front of the waiting line and burst through to the “cooperative” or to the counter by force.

Józef Zelkowicz

Resources

Encyclopedia, p. 25-26.

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Updated: 29-01-2026

Added: 07-07-2023