

THE LODZ GHETTO

Lodz is the second largest city in Poland, known for its textile industry. Before the war, Jews played an influential role in this industry. Lodz was occupied by the German army (Wehrmacht) in September 1939. As part of western Poland, Lodz was annexed to the Reich, and named Litzmannstadt for the German general who had conquered the city in World War I. The Nazis reserved this part of Poland for settlement by Germans, most of whom had lived for generations in the Baltic countries. By the end of 1939, tens of thousands of Jews and Poles had been deported from the area, and Germans were settled there. However, for administrative and logistical reasons, population transfers were halted at the beginning of 1940.

Earlier than most Jewish communities in Poland, the Jews of Lodz suffered from exceptionally brutal persecution, eviction from their homes, and deportation. As early as May 1940, the ghetto was established, and 164,000 Jews were incarcerated in it. The Lodz ghetto was one of the first ghettos to be established and it became the second largest ghetto in the occupied Polish territories. The Lodz ghetto was completely sealed off and detached from the outside world. Since many of the residents of Lodz were of German origin and identified with Germany and the Nazis, Jews there faced a hostile environment. The hostility of their neighbors and the strict closure of the ghetto made it almost impossible to smuggle food into the ghetto, which compelled the Jews to live on the meager ration of food allotted to them by the Germans.

The *Judenrat* in Lodz was led by Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. Before the war, Rumkowski had been a junior member of the Jewish community administration in Lodz. Like many other Jewish leaders during the Holocaust, Rumkowski found himself in an impossible position between obeying German orders and trying to help Jews grapple with the hardships

of ghetto existence. The German authorities created this tension on purpose, hoping the anger and the frustration of the local Jewish population would be spent on Jewish leaders and not the German authorities.



Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, Chief of the Judenrat (center), among Jewish policemen, Lodz, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (36C09)

It appears that Rumkowski often displayed delusions of grandeur and his behavior bordered on dictatorial since he perceived himself to be the only one who could successfully navigate the Lodz Jewish community through troubled times. Although he believed that he could be the savior of the ghetto, in the end, he too was murdered along with most of Lodz Jewry.

BY THE END OF 1942, SOME
204,800 PEOPLE HAD PASSED
THROUGH THE LODZ GHETTO.

The large number of Jews in the ghetto, the total isolation in a hostile environment, the strict supervision imposed by the Germans, the acute hunger, and the difficulties in obtaining the most basic resources necessary to live made it very difficult to survive in the Lodz ghetto.

The struggle for survival was a daily, up-hill battle.

Rumkowski thought that the only possible way to keep people alive in the ghetto was to open factories and workshops so that the German authorities would consider the Jews valuable and allow them to live; his hope was they would live long enough to be liberated. This policy came to be known as “salvation through labor.” Jews forced to work in these factories and workshops manufactured textile products for the Germans. Conditions in the labor workshops were harsh. The factory floors were small and congested, lighting and ventilation were poor, and most work was done by hand for lack of appropriate machinery. Production quotas were set beyond the workers’ abilities. Workers were “remunerated” for their efforts with a portion of soup each day and a slice of bread. Despite Rumkowski’s efforts to obtain increased food rations from the Germans, the daily portions did not suffice, and more than 43,000 Jews starved to death.

In the first years of the ghetto’s existence, the chairman of the *Judenrat* ran an education system with the enrollment of 15,000 children, from preschool to high school; even matriculation exams were given in the ghetto. Regular studies ceased in October 1941. Once children were enrolled in the workshops (to protect them from being deported to death), some managed to continue studying at their place of work. Over 7,000 young people continued to study in this way. However, most of the children, as Josef Zelkowitz mentions, were too busy lining up at the soup kitchens and on the bread lines, carrying around a pot, which Zelkowitz calls “the symbol of the ghetto,” just in case some food was being given out somewhere. In the ghetto, there were also some cultural and religious activities, which were often felt to be no more than a sad reminder of what life had been.

EXCERPTS FROM RUMKOWSKI’S SPEECH OF SEPTEMBER 4, 1942:



[...] The ghetto has been struck a hard blow. They demand what is most dear to it - children and old people [...]. I never imagined that my own hands would be forced to make this sacrifice on the altar. In my old age, I am forced to stretch out my hands and to beg: “Brothers and sisters, give them to me! - Fathers and mothers, give me your children...” (Bitter weeping shakes the assembled public) [...]

There are many people in this ghetto who suffer from tuberculosis, whose days or perhaps weeks are numbered. I do not know, perhaps this is a satanic plan, and perhaps not, but I cannot stop myself from proposing it: “Give me these sick people, and perhaps it will be possible to save the healthy in their place.” I know how precious each one of the sick is in his home, and particularly among Jews. But at a time of such decrees, one must weigh up and measure who should be saved, who can be saved and who may be saved. Common sense requires us to know that those must be saved who can be saved and who have a chance of being saved and not those whom there is no chance to save in any case [...]



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In 1942, the first *Aktion* against the Jews of Lodz took place. Rumkowski adhered to his concept of work as a means of survival, and—presented with the dilemma of who to deport—made the fatal decision to deport children under the age of ten, as well as the sick and the old, because they did not work. He convened the entire ghetto in an open field and addressed them. The *Aktion* associated with this event came to be known as the “Children’s *Aktion*” or *Sperre* (from the German word for curfew), and is an extreme manifestation of the dilemmas leaders of *Judenrate* faced.

During the Children’s *Aktion*, approximately 20,000 very young Jewish children, elderly, and sick were deported over a number of days. Included among them was Dawid Sierakowiak’s mother (see *Excerpts from The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*, September 5, 1942). They were taken to the Chelmno extermination camp where they were murdered in gas vans.

The ghetto continued to exist for two more years, and work was the focal point of ghetto life. The populace was desperately hungry and food could be obtained only through work. The Lodz ghetto was the last remaining ghetto in Poland, and it was only liquidated in August 1944. Most of the remaining inhabitants were transported to Auschwitz, where the majority was murdered, Rumkowski among them. During the four years of its existence, Jews in the Lodz ghetto attempted, despite the severe hardships, to preserve some of their previous ways of life and imbue their daily lives in the arbitrary and hopeless ghetto reality with meaning.

Rumkowski’s idea—which was shared by other *Judenrat* heads—of work as a means of survival, turned out to be erroneous. Within the circumstances of the “Final Solution” all Jews were targeted for murder, and the speech quoted above manifests how impossible it was to fathom this reality at the time and how tragic the dilemmas of the *Judenrate* really were.



Children Celebrating Purim in the Ghetto, Lodz, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (4062/194)

In the summer of 1944, an unknown Jew was sent from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz. Upon his arrival at the camp, he entrusted his diary, which he carried on his last journey, to a member of the Sonderkommando, Zalman Loewenthal. Loewenthal hid the diary, but also felt a historical obligation to add some of his own comments in the margins. The writer of the diary blamed Rumkowski for the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews of Lodz, and Loewenthal added in his own hand that the accusatory finger should be pointed at the Germans—they were the ones who were truly responsible for the murder of the Jews. All three of these individuals, the writer of the diary, Zalman Loewenthal, and Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, perished in Auschwitz.



ABOUT PHOTOS

From left to right: Jews rounded up in the ghetto, apparently prior to deportation, Lodz, Poland (4062/448); Jews pushing a “Scheisskommando” cart, Lodz, Poland (4062/153).

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