**The Łodz Ghetto**

On the eve of the Second World War, Łodz was the second largest city in Poland; almost a third of the city’s inhabitants were Jewish (c. 233,000). On the 8th of September 1939, the Germans overran the city. Acts of violence against the Jews broke out immediately – many Jews were arrested, maltreated, publicly humiliated, and taken to perform forced labor. In addition, the Germans published a series of decrees destroying the city’s Jews financial and social basis of life.

On the 17th of September, the Soviet Union invaded Poland. In accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Poland was divided between Germany and the Soviet Union (see map). The Western part, the Wartheland, was annexed to the Reich. On the 8th of November, Łodz was added to this area and renamed Litzmannstadt.

On the 1st of May 1940, the city’s poorest streets were converted into the Jewish Ghetto, in whose area of about four-square kilometers 160,000 people lived. Most of the ghetto houses were dilapidated wooden buildings, each with a small number of apartments, and lacking connections to facilities such as the sewage system, gas heating, or running water. Even before the Jews were forced to move into the ghetto, the German authorities appointed a Judenrat, with Chaim Mordechaj Rumkowski as its head.

The greatest hardship in the ghetto was hunger. Unlike other ghettos, the Łodz Ghetto was hermetically sealed off from the other parts of the city, and there was no way to smuggle in food. The Jews were completely dependent on the Germans for provisions, which they were provided in only miniscule amounts. Overcrowding, hunger, and poor sanitary conditions in the ghetto led to diseases and epidemics. About 21% of the ghetto’s inhabitants, some 44,000 Jews, died during its four years of existence.

Many social, cultural and support activities took place in the ghetto: soup-kitchens were established, and self-help organizations and cultural institutions were founded. There were youth movements and educational activities – including schooling, lectures, and even libraries – that were run clandestinely. Because it was a sealed off and isolated ghetto, the first from which Jews in Poland were sent to destruction, its inhabitants had no knowledge of the plan to murder them, and did not organize resistance. In addition, Rumkowski’s policies made establishing an underground all but impossible. For this reason, the youth movements did not transform into revolutionary movements, as happened in other ghettos.

The Jews in the ghetto were forced to support not only their own living expenses, but also the costs of the German ghetto administration, whose head was Hans Biebow. Within a short period of time, Biebow converted the ghetto into a source of profits for himself and other Nazi functionaries by establishing factories in the ghetto, the so-called “Resorts.” Within one year, 117 factories were established in the ghetto, which supplied most of the needs of the German military in the area until 1942, and produced profits of more than 350 million German Marks before the ghetto was liquidated. Rumkowski encouraged the Resorts, believing their profitability would ensure the continued existence of the ghetto. Work at the Resorts was very demanding, but Rumkowski’s relative freedom of action in internal matters created an illusion of normality. The Jews believed that, despite the difficulties, they would manage to persevere, and for this reason they even sent young children to work.

At the beginning of January, the deportations from the ghetto to the extermination camp of Chełmno began. By May 1942, some 55,000 Jews were murdered on this site, using gas vans. The most traumatic deportation, the *Sperre*,took place in September 1942: Biebow informed Rumkowski of the deportation of 20,000 people aged 65 and over, as well as children under ten, and the sick, and provided him with the possibility of organizing the deportation. Rumkowski hoped to save as many people as possible, in order to keep the ghetto running. In his famous speech he said: “I must conduct this difficult and bloody operation; I must sever limbs in order to save the body! I must take children […].”

On the 5th of September 1942 a strict curfew was imposed upon the ghetto. Under the cover of the curfew (Gehsperre) the Jewish Police began the deportation. On the 7th of September, the Germans marched into the ghetto, as they were unhappy with the pace of the deportations. They conducted selections, disregarding lists, documents, or the age of those selected. During this action, which lasted a week, the Germans murdered hundreds of Jews, and deported 15,685 others to Auschwitz, almost a third of them children under the age of 15. Most of those deported were between the ages of 16 and 55, that is, people who were of working age, and not, as Rumkowski had been promised, only those unable to work productively. During 1942, a total of some 70,000 Jews were murdered in Chełmno.