

THE LODZ GHETTO

INTRODUCTION

The Lodz ghetto was one of the first ghettos to be established. It became a deadly place. It was built in a neglected part of the city, surrounded by a hostile population, and tightly sealed. The ghetto was isolated and controlled, making smuggling food impossible. Some 43,000 Jews, 21% of the ghetto population, died from starvation and disease. The struggle for survival was a daily, uphill battle.

HISTORY

Lodz is the second largest city in Poland, known for its textile industry. It was occupied by the German army (Wehrmacht) in September 1939 and soon after annexed (made a part of Germany). Lodz was renamed Litzmannstadt for the German general who had conquered the city in WWI. 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, population transfers were halted at the beginning of 1940 for logistical and other reasons.

Earlier than most Jewish communities in Poland, the Jews of Lodz suffered from exceptionally brutal persecution, eviction from their homes, and deportation. The ghetto was established in May 1940 and 164,000 Jews were imprisoned there. The Lodz ghetto became the second largest ghetto in the occupied Polish territories. It was completely sealed off and detached from the outside world. The ghetto was surrounded by a hostile environment since many of the residents of Lodz were of German origin and identified with Germany and the Nazis. This hostility, the strict closure of the ghetto, and the death penalty for anyone caught trying to leave, made it almost impossible to smuggle in food. The Jews of Lodz were therefore forced to live on the meager ration of food allotted to them by the Germans.

The *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) 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



Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, Chief of the Judenrat (center), among Jewish policemen, Lodz, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (36CO9)

himself in an impossible position between obeying German orders and trying to help Jews cope 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.

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

A number of factors made it very difficult to survive in the Lodz ghetto. There was a large number of Jews in an overcrowded area – on average, 8-10 people lived in each room. This, along with malnutrition, led to the spread of epidemics, such as typhus. Most of the houses were old and run-down and were not connected to a sewage system. Fewer than 2% were connected to cooking gas. Hunger was severe and it was difficult to obtain the most basic resources necessary to live. About one fifth of the population died of starvation, disease, and these miserable conditions.

“SALVATION THROUGH LABOR”

Rumkowski thought that the only way to keep people alive in the ghetto was to open factories and workshops (*Ressorts*) in which even young children would work. He reasoned 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.” Over 100 factories were established in the ghetto, the majority producing textiles. Jews forced to work in these factories and workshops suffered harsh physical conditions, and the demands to produce set numbers of goods were beyond the workers’ abilities. Workers received a portion of soup each day and a slice of bread.

In the first years of the ghetto’s existence, the *Judenrat* ran an education system for 15,000 children from preschool to high school. This ended in October 1941. Children were enrolled in the workshops to protect

them from being deported to death. Over 7,000 managed to continue studying at their place of work.

Ghetto inhabitants were required to stand in line for hours on end to receive their family’s food rations. Bread and other food were distributed only once every few days and families were forced to make do until the next food distribution. Most of the children who were not working were too busy lining up at the soup kitchens and on the bread lines to attend school. These children carried around a pot just in case some food was being given out somewhere. Joseph Zelkowicz, a journalist who wrote about life in the Lodz Ghetto, called the soup pot “the symbol of the ghetto.”

The Jews struggled to preserve some of their previous ways of life and to create meaning in the hopeless ghetto reality. There were some cultural and religious activities, 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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EXTERMINATION

In January 1942, deportations began from Lodz to the Chelmno murder site, where the Jews were killed by means of gas vans. Between January and May 1942, 54,900 Jews and 5,000 Sinti and Roma, who had been temporarily interned in Lodz, were killed – about one third of the ghetto population.

In September 1942, an *Aktion* (action) against the Jews of Lodz took place. As head of the *Judenrat*, Rumkowski was forced to prepare lists of candidates for deportation. In the face of this terrible dilemma, he followed his concept of work as salvation. Rumkowski 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 gathered the entire ghetto in an open field and addressed them. Excerpts from his speech are below. This *Aktion* came to be known as the “Children’s *Aktion*” or *Sperre* (from the German word for lock) and is an extreme example of the dilemmas leaders of *Judenraete* faced. In the one excruciating week of the Children’s *Aktion*, approximately 20,000 Jewish children, elderly, and sick were deported. Included among them was Dawid Sierakowiak’s mother (see *Excerpts from The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*, September 5, 1942). They were taken to Chelmno and murdered.

By the end of 1942 almost half of the Jews interned in Lodz had been murdered in Chelmno. At this stage, forced labor was no longer just a means to fight hunger; it had become a temporary means of avoiding deportations. The ghetto became mainly a labor camp.

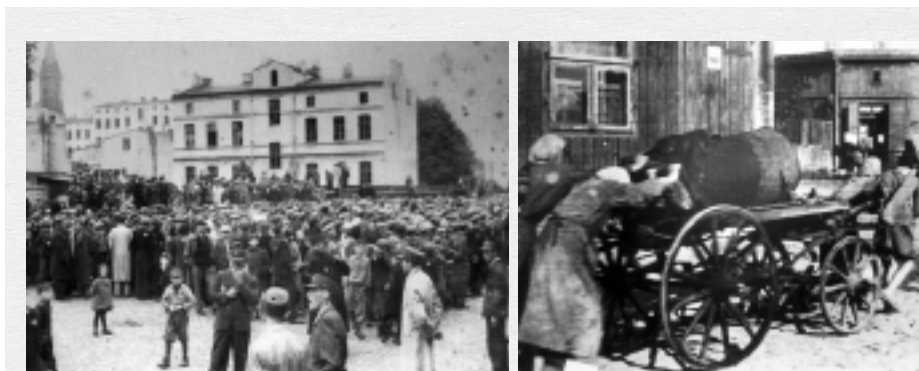
The ghetto continued to exist for two more years. Work was the focal point of ghetto life. The populace was desperately hungry and food could be obtained only through work.



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

The Lodz Ghetto was the last remaining ghetto in Poland, liquidated in August 1944. Most of the remaining inhabitants were transported to Auschwitz, where the majority was murdered, Rumkowski among them.

Rumkowski’s idea of rescue through labor — which was shared by other *Judenrat* heads — did not succeed in the ghettos. With the “Final Solution,” all Jews were ultimately targeted for murder, no matter how productive they were. Jews who survived at various camps as laborers only did so because the machinery of murder did not catch up to them before the end of the war. The speech quoted above shows how impossible it was to grasp this reality at the time and how tragic the dilemmas of the *Judenraete* really were.



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).

Yad Vashem Photo Archive