

The Lodz Ghetto, the second-largest Jewish ghetto during the Holocaust, was one of the first ghettos to be formed and one of the last to be liquidated. The residents of the Lodz Ghetto were forced to live in sub-human conditions, receiving little food and performing slave labor. However, the ghetto's longevity and the survival of thousands of Jews was because of the leadership of Chaim Rumkowski, viewed as both a hero and a merciless dictator. Rumkowski saved thousands of Jews while sending thousands of children and elderly to death camps.

Before World War II, Lodz, Poland, was a thriving industrial city, considered the textile capital of Eastern Europe (Adelson). Lodz was home to a population of 231,000 Jews, 34% of the total population of the city (Lodz: 1919-1948). Along with the rest of Poland, Lodz was invaded by the Germans in September 1939. Soon after the German invasion, harsh anti-Jewish laws were put into effect, including the law requiring Jews to wear a Star of David armband. Riots were a frequent occurrence and Jews were randomly beaten and killed in the streets (Rosenberg).

In December 1939, the Nazi governor of Lodz, Friedrich Übelhör, ordered the establishment of a Jewish ghetto in Lodz (Rosenberg). The ghetto was to house Jews from Lodz and other areas of Poland, as well as Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, Bohemia and Moravia (Hasday). In all, a total of more than 300,000 people were to move into the Lodz Ghetto (Lodz: 1919-1948). The Nazis planned to establish the ghetto in one day, but the large amount of people set to move in pushed the date back three weeks. The ghetto was sealed on April 30, 1940, and the Jews of Lodz were separated from the rest of society (Espino A16).

Inside the ghetto, food was scarce and was often rotten and had no nutritional value. The typical ghetto resident survived on bread, moldy fruits and vegetables, and water (Rosenberg). Malnutrition, cramped living conditions and poor sanitation led to diseases such as typhus and tuberculosis (Altman 39). Diseases spread throughout the population of the ghetto quickly because of the cramped living conditions. Ghetto residents lived in tiny apartments with seven to eight people to an apartment. The apartments did not have heat or indoor plumbing. The lack of heat was only made worse by the harsh winters. The cold froze residents' food and also led to frost bite (Rosenberg). Lodz Ghetto survivor Renee Salt, who was 13 when she arrived in the ghetto, remembers, "The overcrowding, starvation and disease were just appalling. People were dying in the streets" (Shenker). Seven months after the establishment of the Lodz Ghetto 13,000 Jews had died because of disease and starvation (Altman 35).

Chaim Rumkowski was the head of the Lodz *Judenrat*; he was officially *Älteste der Juden*, the eldest of the Jews (Krakowski). Rumkowski had absolute power over ghetto residents and it was he who controlled food distribution and work assignments. He saw the ghetto as an autonomous state and himself as its supreme ruler (Altman 31). Rumkowski had no opposition; anyone who spoke out against him or his policies was immediately deported (Rosenberg). Despite his personal desire for power, Rumkowski's goal was to keep as many Jews in the Lodz Ghetto alive as was possible. He proposed a plan to the Nazis, known as "rescue through work." Rumkowski's plan was for the Jews to perform slave labor in factories making supplies for the war effort in exchange for food. The Nazis accepted this plan, and Jews immediately began work in the factories (Altman 33).

Roman Halter is a Lodz Ghetto survivor who worked in a metal factory. He recalled, “...our reward was a soup... People who could not work and get the soup were condemned to a slow death, or were deported and died” (Shenker).

Rumkowski was not naïve; he knew that he could not save every person in the Lodz Ghetto. He estimated that his efforts to save lives through work would spare about 10,000 people from death (Adelson).

Despite Rumkowski’s efforts to make the Jews necessary to the Nazi cause through slave labor, the Nazis ordered 20,000 Jews from the Lodz Ghetto sent to the Chelmno death camp in December 1941, beginning the liquidation, or deportation of residents, of the ghetto. The liquidation continued in January 1942, when 1,000 people were deported from Lodz to Chelmno each day (Rosenberg). Throughout the deportations, Rumkowski continued to assure the remaining Jews of Lodz that he was in control and had the power to stop the deportations. In reality, Rumkowski could only bargain with the Nazis so that a smaller number of Jews were deported in each selection (Altman 61-62). In desperation, Rumkowski tried to save Jews working in factories by deporting young children and the elderly. Rationalizing these deportations, Rumkowski proclaimed, “I must cut off limbs in order to save the body.” (MacArthur).

Finally, in June 1944, Heinrich Himmler, chief of Hitler’s secret police, ordered the Lodz Ghetto to be liquidated. The remaining residents of the ghetto felt that they had no chance to survive. Halter remembers thinking, “...at a certain stage we were all condemned to death” (Shenker). Eventually, even the leaders of the ghetto were deported. The final transports from Lodz included Chaim Rumkowski and his family (Rosenberg). They were taken to Auschwitz and were gassed (Altman 98). By August of that year, all but 877 Jewish workers had been

deported from the Lodz Ghetto and sent to death camps (Rosenberg). Overall, only 7,000 Jews from the Lodz Ghetto lived through the Holocaust. Salt commented, “Looking back, you really can’t believe that you survived...” (Shenker).

Jews living in the Lodz Ghetto were forced to live in unsanitary conditions with almost no food, however, some Jews were saved because of the “rescue through work” plan formulated and carried out by Chaim Rumkowski, though most were deported and killed during the final liquidation of the ghetto. The most controversial person in the Lodz Ghetto was Chaim Rumkowski. He is either viewed as a noble man put into a difficult situation because of his position and responsibility to the Nazis, or a ruthless dictator who sent thousands of people to their deaths.

From my research, I concluded that Rumkowski was both. I believe he genuinely wanted to save some of the Lodz Jews. However, I think he treated the lives of ghetto children and elderly as disposable because he wanted to save those who would contribute toward his plan of “rescue through work.” Learning about Chaim Rumkowski has made me realize that people’s actions are not just “good” and “evil.” I believe that Chaim Rumkowski was doing what he felt was best for his people. It is impossible to tell if Rumkowski was “good” or “evil” because we cannot know his motivations in saving some while selecting others for death. As a result of my research, I have learned that in difficult times, such as the Holocaust, people are forced to make choices they would never have to otherwise. Chaim Rumkowski was forced to make choices between life and death and I think that he did what he felt was necessary for his people to survive.

Works Cited

- Altman, Linda Jacobs. The Holocaust Ghettos. Springfield: Enslow Publishers, 1998.
- Espino, Nathaniel. "Remembering the Pain of Lodz After Decades of Forgetting." Toronto Star 30 Aug. 2004: A16. Student Research Center. EBSCOhost. Liberty High Lib., Liberty, MO. 9 Nov. 2007 <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.
- Hasday, Judy L. "The Most Terrible Place on Earth." Modern World History Online. Rpt. of The Holocaust, Great Disasters: Reforms & Ramifications. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2001. Modern World History Online. Facts On File. 6 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.fofweb.com/>>.
- Krakowski, Shmuel. "Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski." Encyclopedia of the Holocaust. 2 vols. Farmington Hills: MacMillan Reference USA, 1995. History Resource Center: World. Gale. Mid-Continent Public Lib., Liberty, MO. 28 Nov. 2007 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.mcpl.lib.mo.us/>>.
- "Lodz: 1919-1948." The City of Lodz Office. 28 Nov. 2007 <http://www.uml.lodz.pl/_angielska/.php3?zapytanie=2,01,01,03>.
- MacArthur, Brian. "Chaim Rumkowski 'Give me your children.'" The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches (1999). History Study Center. ProQuest. Liberty High Lib., Liberty, MO. 9 Nov. 2007 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>.
- "One Life Lost." The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak. Ed. Alan Adelson. Trans. Kamil Turowski. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. 3-15.
- Rosenberg, Jennifer. "The Lodz Ghetto." Remember.org. 1998. 7 Nov. 2007 <<http://remember.org>>.
- Shenker, Sarah. "Survivors Recall Lodz Ghetto Horror." BBC News Online. 28 Aug. 2004. BBC News . 29 Nov. 2007 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/europe/3606390.stm>>.