

On an average day one could hear from the first or second story windows of the alleys of Lodz the sound of a camera clicking busily below. One of the 164,000 Jews forced to live in the Lodz Ghetto during the Holocaust was Mendel Grossman,<sup>1</sup> a slim man with a soft, wise smile and eyes that expressed goodness and care for his fellow humans.<sup>2</sup> He dedicated himself to preserving a testimony of the tragedy that went on before his eyes in the Lodz Ghetto, encouraging his neighbors to record their struggles and harnessing the essence of daily life in the ghetto in photos that earned him the title “The Lodz Ghetto Photographer”.<sup>3</sup>

The Lodz Ghetto was full of content to photograph. Overcrowded and rampant with contagious diseases, the Lodz witnessed tens of thousands of lives perish because of illness, starvation, cold, or just loss of hope.<sup>4</sup> An average factory worker received a watered-down bowl of soup, one loaf of bread for five days, a small amount of preserved vegetables, and a brown water that resembled coffee.<sup>5</sup> Additional rations were placed on coal and wood, so in the harsh Lodz winters, wooden structures such as buildings, fences, and outhouses were torn to pieces by the desperate residents.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, starvation because of the lack of food and hypothermia due to lack of adequate clothing was prevalent in the ghetto and contagious diseases were rampant. When plumbing broke down, human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage.<sup>7</sup> Grossman attempted to capture this myriad of experiences in daily Lodz life in order to show it to future generations. Once Grossman witnessed an entire family dragging a wagon filled with excrement through the street. He hesitated to take out his camera for fear of recording the degradation of the people. The father of the family stopped, however, and requested that Grossman take the photo, reasoning, “Let it remain for the future; let others know how humiliated we were.”<sup>8</sup>

The Lodz Ghetto was initially proposed in December of 1939, just three months after the city's occupation by the Germans, as a way to concentrate the Jews of central Poland until a final

solution could be found to the “Jewish problem.”<sup>9</sup> The ghetto would be created in an area of 4.3 kilometers located in the northern section of the city, where many of the 230,000 Jews in Lodz were already living. A warning was issued in January of 1940 to keep non-Jews out of the area, proclaiming that the area was rampant with infectious diseases.<sup>10</sup> The Jews, stripped of all valuables and locked away from the rest of society, were sealed in the ghetto in May of 1940.<sup>11</sup>

One Jew, Mordekchai Chaim Rumkowski, was placed by the Nazis to run the Lodz Ghetto. No one was sure why the Nazis chose this sixty-two-year-old man to be in charge, but he made a continual effort to strengthen the autonomy of the ghetto.<sup>12</sup> The hunger crisis was of great concern for residents, especially since the Nazis expected the Jews to pay for their living expenses even though all of their money had been taken from them.<sup>13</sup> In April of 1940, Rumkowski proposed a plan to the Nazis in order to ameliorate the situation: The Nazis would deliver raw materials, the Jews would work in factories to produce the final products, and the Jews would be paid but only in food--the amount of food was not specified at the time. Several factories were established where adults worked, and older people and children worked in mica splitting factories.<sup>14</sup>

In the fall of 1941, 20,000 more transports were scheduled to arrive in the Lodz Ghetto, a number nearly impossible to absorb given the ghetto’s situation. The new arrivals were shocked at the living conditions in the ghetto, and some never adjusted, sure that whenever they boarded the death trains, they were going to somewhere better than the Lodz Ghetto.<sup>15</sup>

From January of 1942 to June of 1944, the ghetto received several “wedding invitations,” or summons for deportations, and the trains carried away about one thousand people daily during this time.<sup>16</sup> Still 75,000 others were loaded into trucks and gassed by carbon monoxide.<sup>17</sup> The deportations gradually eliminated all of the sick, elderly, and children of the ghetto, leaving only the workers. On June 10, 1944 the ghetto was ordered to be liquidated, and the Lodz Ghetto

residents boarded the trains to Auschwitz having been told that they were needed to repair damages caused by the air raids in Germany.<sup>18</sup> Five months after the liquidation began, the Soviets liberated the Lodz Ghetto. Only 877 survivors remained.<sup>19</sup>

During these years, Mendel Grossman took to recording daily occurrences in the Lodz Ghetto. He had obtained a job in the ghetto's department of statistics as a photographer of ghetto workshop products and of identification for work permits. With plenty of supplies, a lab for printing, and a cover for Grossman's real work, the Lodz photographer was equipped to capture the essence of Lodz.<sup>20</sup> His coat pockets were cut open on the inside, and he could easily manipulate the camera and snap photos by turning his body, slightly opening his coat, and taking the photo.<sup>21</sup> Grossman's friends and family often warned him that the Gestapo was on his tracks, but he continued to photograph every event in the ghetto.<sup>22</sup>

Grossman made several copies of his photos and distributed them freely, keeping only the negatives in round tin cans.<sup>23</sup> He stressed to his friends that he wanted the photos to be a testimony of the ghetto after the war. When the Red Army was approaching on the eastern front, Grossman packed the tin cans in a wooden crate, which he hid in the wall of his apartment. A few days afterwards the Gestapo found some of his abandoned prints, and he was sent to a labor camp. In poor health, Grossman could not withstand the cruel death march out of camp, and he collapsed with his camera still in hand.<sup>24</sup>

One of Grossman's closest friends remained in the Lodz Ghetto until after its liberation, and he concealed many of Grossman's photos at the bottom of a well. After the war the archives were collected and sent to Israel. They are now housed in the Museum of Holocaust Resistance in Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot, Israel.<sup>25</sup>

Mendel Grossman's desire to record life in the Lodz Ghetto at any price was an inspiration to many other ghetto inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> His bravery and dedication is an inspiration to me

as well. In the busy modern world, it is often easy for me to become blind to my fellow human beings and to their needs. I become so focused on completing my schoolwork or on saving money for college that I neglect to see the marvel of human life in my everyday activities.

Grossman’s work taught me that only when one focuses on others rather than on himself is he willing to risk his life in order that injustice like that of the ghettos may not be ignored. My hope is that I can be as caring and courageous as Grossman was in the difficult situations that may arise someday in my life.

#### End Notes

1. Frank Dabba Smith, *My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto* (New York, Harcourt, 2000).

2. Chris Webb, “Mendel Grossman: The Lodz Ghetto Photographer,” Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/grossman.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

3. Ibid.

4. United States Holocaust Museum, “The ‘Final Solution’: Ghetto Life,” <http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/lghetto.htm> (accessed February 3, 2008).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid

7. Ibid.

8. Chis Webb.

9. Jennifer Rosenberg, “The Lodz Ghetto,” Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/lodz.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Allyson Spacht, “The Lodz and Warsaw Ghettos,” Cold Spring Harbor High School, <http://www.learns.org/hgp/aeti/aeti-1998-no-frames/lodz-warsaw-ghettos.htm> (accessed February 3, 2008).

18. Jennifer Rosenberg.

19. Ibid.

20. Chris Webb.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

## Bibliography

Rosenberg, Jennifer. “The Lodz Ghetto.” Jewish Virtual Library.  
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/lodz.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

This source explains in detail the formation and organization of the Lodz Ghetto as well as gives a chronological overview of the ghetto’s existence. Although not much is said about daily ghetto life, specific information about the Nazis’ actions in relation to the ghetto is abundant on this site.

Smith, Frank Dabba. *My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto*. New York: Harcourt, 2000.

A book dedicated to several of Grossman’s photos of Lodz, this source also provides information about Grossman’s life and about the Lodz Ghetto in general.

Spacht, Allyson. “The Lodz and Warsaw Ghettos.” Cold Spring Harbor High School.  
<http://www.learns.org/hgp/aeti/aeti-1998-no-frames/lodz-warsaw-ghettos.htm> (accessed February 3, 2008).

This website provides an overview of the organization and operation of the Lodz and Warsaw Ghettos. Many useful numbers relating to the ghettos can be found on this site as well.

United States Holocaust Museum. “The ‘Final Solution’: Ghetto Life.”  
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/lghetto.htm> (accessed February 3, 2008).

The information on this site about life in the ghettos is very revealing. Although about ghettos in general, the website offers specific data for the Warsaw and Lodz Ghettos, two very well-known ghettos.

Webb, Chris. “Mendel Grossman: The Lodz Ghetto Photographer.” Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team.  
<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/grossman.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

This source provides a complete biography of Mendel Grossman, who photographed daily life in the Lodz Ghetto. Not only was the information about Grossman useful, but the intimate details of ghetto life were also shared on this site. There is also a gallery of some of Grossman’s photos of Lodz.