

«And So We Arrived in the Ghetto».* The Łódź Ghetto in David Boder's Interviews

Stefania Zezza**

Abstract. This article analyzes the interviews conducted by David Boder (1886-1961) with survivors of the Łódź Ghetto, focusing on the intersections of memory, trauma, spatial experience, and social structure. Boder's 1946 recordings, among the earliest oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, offer a unique perspective because they provide a reconstruction of events from within and allow for an examination of how traumatic memory is narrated and mediated. Through the case of Israel Unikowski and others, the article explores how survivors reconstructed their lived experiences within the peculiar social and environmental conditions of the ghetto. The rigid bureaucratic structure of the Łódź Ghetto, the leadership of Chaim Rumkowski, and the totalizing function of forced labor profoundly influenced daily life, interpersonal relationships, and the narratives that emerged after liberation. Boder's role as interviewer, as well as the linguistic and cultural distance between him and the survivors, also shaped the way in which testimonies were formulated and recounted. From a methodological standpoint, the article reflects on how oral history functions not only as a repository of individual memory, but also as a performative act, conditioned by trauma, temporality, and the presence of the interviewer. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to a broader debate on Holocaust testimony, emphasizing the need to read oral sources critically and contextually to fully understand their complexity.

Keywords: Holocaust, Testimony, Traumatic Memory, Łódź Ghetto, Oral History.

Riassunto. «E così arrivammo nel ghetto». Il ghetto di Łódź nelle interviste di David Boder. Questo articolo analizza le interviste condotte da David Boder (1886-1961) con i sopravvissuti del ghetto di Łódź, concentrandosi sulle intersezioni tra memoria, trauma, esperienza spaziale e struttura sociale. Le registrazioni di Boder del 1946, tra le prime testimonianze orali dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah, offrono una prospettiva unica perché presentano una ricostruzione degli eventi dall'interno, e offrono l'opportunità di esaminare come la memoria traumatica venga narrata e mediata. Attraverso il caso di Israel Unikowski e altri, l'articolo esplora il modo in cui i sopravvissuti hanno ricostruito le loro esperienze vissute all'interno della peculiare situazione sociale e ambientale del ghetto. La rigida struttura burocratica del ghetto di Łódź, la direzione di Chaim Rumkowski, la funzione totalizzante del lavoro forzato hanno influenzato profondamente la vita quotidiana, le relazioni interpersonali e le narrazioni emerse dopo la liberazione. Il ruolo di Boder come intervistatore, la distanza linguistica, e culturale tra lui e i sopravvissuti, hanno inoltre inciso sul modo in cui le testimonianze sono state formulate e narrate. Dal punto di vista metodologico, l'articolo riflette quindi su come la storia orale funzioni non solo come deposito della memoria individuale, ma anche come atto performativo, condizionato dal trauma, dalla temporalità e dalla presenza dell'intervistatore. L'analisi contribuisce infine a un più ampio dibattito sulla testimonianza della Shoah, sottolineando la necessità di leggere le fonti orali in modo critico e contestuale per comprenderne la complessità.

Parole chiave: Shoah, Testimonianza, Memoria, Trauma, Łódź Ghetto, Storia Orale.

Introduction

This paper investigates the Jewish condition and internal perspective on the Łódź Ghetto through an analysis of seven survivors' interviews conducted by the American psychologist David Boder in 1946. Examining these testimonies offers insight into what Jewish survivors remembered from their time in the ghetto and how they interpreted the events, figures, and dynamics of that environment.

Boder's primary objective was to explore how the catastrophe of the Holocaust had affected survivors' psyches. Using a wire recorder, he collected approximately one hundred interviews with individuals residing in Displaced Persons camps or temporary shelters in the immediate postwar

* https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693/transcript?keywords%5B%5D=sent.

** Ph.D., Tor Vergata University of Rome. Address: Via Domenico Silveri 3, 00165 Roma, Italy, e-mail <stefania.zezza@gmail.com>.

period. Upon returning to the United States, he transcribed and translated these interviews. Boder's interviewing method was particularly attuned to identifying traumatic experiences, drawing attention to survivors' linguistic choices, specific expressions, and narrative structures.



David P. Boder (1886-1961), pictured in the cover of the German edition (*Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt*. Edited by Julia Faisst, Alan Rosen & Werner Sollors. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011) of his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949)

This project has marked a significant milestone in the direction advocated, already in the aftermath of the war, by Philip Friedman, who emphasized the importance of giving voice to the victims in reconstructing the events of the Holocaust. Although Boder was not a historian, his interviews offer a distinctly Jewish perspective on the events of the Holocaust—in this case, life in the Łódź Ghetto. These testimonies were collected at a time when neither a coherent historical narrative nor a collective memory of the Holocaust had yet emerged; for many survivors, it was their first time recounting and articulating their experiences. Consequently, the events and details they chose to recall offer invaluable insight into both individual and communal memory.

This study approaches the interviews by focusing on key themes that align with central frameworks in memory studies: time, space, social structure and language. It considers the chronological dimension of the survivors' narratives: which events were remembered as pivotal, and why? To what extent do their memories converge or diverge? In terms of spatial perception: how was the ghetto environment experienced and recalled? What can these testimonies reveal about spatial awareness and movement within the ghetto? If, as Friedman suggested, the ghetto may be conceived as a "psycho-sociological laboratory," these interviews shed light on the character of ghetto society—its internal transformations, the interviewees' views on Chaim Rumkowski and the Jewish Council, perceptions of the German authorities, and the broader mechanisms of antisemitic policy. They also help to reconstruct the daily challenges of ghetto life, including the levels of knowledge, awareness, and understanding that inhabitants had about events both within and beyond the ghetto walls.

Ultimately, this analysis contributes to reframing established historical narratives through a Judeo-centric lens, offering new insights into life in the Łódź Ghetto by foregrounding survivor memory and interpretation.

The Interviews

As Philip Friedman observed, *khurban forschung* (destruction research)—what would later evolve into the field of Holocaust studies—could not rely exclusively on German sources, which were inherently biased sometimes, frequently misleading, and concerned primarily with administrative aspects of the persecution of the Jews. Friedman recognized the complexity inherent in reconstructing a history of events that were both unprecedented and methodologically challenging, necessitating the use of non-traditional historical materials. Thus, in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of the catastrophe, German official documents had to be complemented by Jewish sources—particularly those that reflected the victims’ perspectives, such as diaries, letters, and oral testimonies. Only through this integration of perpetrator records and victim narratives could historians approach a fuller, more nuanced reconstruction of the Holocaust experience,

be balanced and complemented by Jewish records and statements—interviews with Jewish survivors, reports by Jewish groups and individuals, and biographical materials. [...] The inner Jewish history, the sufferings and the spiritual life, are rarely or falsely reflected in the German sources, and must be studied in Jewish sources. (Friedman 1980, 503)

The Polish historian knew the issues connected to the collection, interpretation and use of ego documents, anyhow he believed that their inevitable subjective approach and their being limited to personal experience were not insuperable problems. Interviewers needed to be trained to use sociological methods, such as interviews and questionnaires, which had to be “matched and read against each other and further placed in context with perpetrator documents” (Jockush 2012, 9). In the summer of 1945, a comprehensive questionnaire was prepared in Łódź by the *Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna* (Central Jewish Historical Commission, CŻKH), which had originally been founded in Lublin at the end of 1944 by Philip Friedman and other survivors. The Commission’s primary objective was to collect and document evidence of the recent catastrophe that had befallen European Jewry. The questionnaire provided a detailed framework for interviewers, comprising 209 questions addressing both the social and historical dimensions of Jewish life during the Holocaust. Notably, it also included inquiries into the psychological condition of Jewish populations in ghettos and camps, thus reflecting an early recognition of the importance of understanding survivors’ inner experiences alongside factual documentation.

This is precisely what David Boder undertook one year later, when he traveled to Europe to carry out his pioneering project of interviewing Holocaust survivors. Although Boder’s methodology was grounded in a psychological framework, his interviews have come to represent a valuable historical and sociological source for understanding and reconstructing the lived experiences of Jews in ghettos and concentration camps. Between July and September 1946, Boder conducted interviews with seven men who had been imprisoned in the Łódź Ghetto and were, at the time, residing as displaced persons in France. Their median age was 37 years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 56. The first interview was conducted in Paris on 30 July 1946 with Adam Krakowski, who was born in Łódź in 1925. Additional insights into Krakowski’s experience can be found in a second interview conducted approximately five decades later as part of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) project that sought to re-interview Boder’s original subjects.¹ Israel Unikowski, born in Kalisz, Poland, in 1928, was another survivor interviewed by Boder—on 2 August 1946—and later re-interviewed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) as part of its follow-up

¹ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn44522>

project. Boder met Unikowski at an institution operated by the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE) in the Château de Bucicaut at Fontenay-aux-Roses, France, where he also interviewed Mendel Herskovitz, born in Łódź in 1928, on 31 July 1946. The remaining interviews were conducted in August in Paris: Julian Weinberg, born in Łódź in 1890, was interviewed on 17 August; Jacob Minski, born in Zurich in 1907 but deported from Hamburg to the Łódź Ghetto, was interviewed on 23 August. The final two interviews took place on 13 September 1946 in Hénonville, with Itzhak Brin, aged 38, who had been in Sieradz at the outbreak of the war, and with Pinkhus Rosenfeld, born in Łódź in 1903.

The chronology of the interviews is relevant, since Boder, who did not know much about the Łódź ghetto at the beginning, progressively acquired more information and asked more and more details about the living conditions there. Krakowski, the first interviewee, could not talk much about the ghetto because he was deported in March 1940, before the ghetto was sealed. “A part of the Jews were sent to various towns in the General Government; not all [of them]. The rest remained in Łódź in the Ghetto”² he told Boder. The Germans sized his family’s apartment and sent them to Nowy Sącz inside the General Government, then he was deported from there to work as a forced laborer in Rodzno and other camps. Krakowski’s testimony illustrates the broader experience of Jews in Łódź following the German occupation. Upon seizing control of the city, the Nazi authorities dispossessed Jews of their homes and means of subsistence. In the early phase of occupation, they implemented a policy of deportation to the General Government as part of a wider effort to “Germanize” Łódź, which, having been incorporated into the Warthegau, was formally annexed into the Third Reich.

The second and third interviews—conducted with Mendel Herskovitz and Israel Unikowski, respectively—enabled Boder to gain a more comprehensive understanding of life inside the Łódź Ghetto. Herskovitz had initially attempted to flee the city as the German army advanced but was forced to return. He was subsequently interned in the ghetto, where he remained until 1943, when he was deported to Częstochowa. His family, who stayed behind in the ghetto, was murdered after his departure. One of the most compelling aspects of this interview is his emphasis on family life, which offers valuable insight into the shifting social dynamics within the ghetto under extreme conditions.

The interview conducted with Israel Unikowski, is particularly informative. Although he had prepared a written account of his life, Boder and his assistant persuaded him to give an unrestrained account about his experiences instead. They explained that their approach focused “exclusively upon verbal reports without notes or memoranda,”³ highlighting the value they placed on oral testimony as a means of capturing the survivor’s immediate, unmediated, recollections. Unikowski and his brother were orphans. When the Germans occupied Poland, they left the orphanage in Kalisz and went to Łódź. Israel survived his brother and stayed in the ghetto until his deportation to Auschwitz, where he arrived on 21 August 1944. This boy’s resourcefulness and intelligence not only enabled him to survive alone until the liquidation of the ghetto, but also allowed him to grasp both the broader context and the intricacies of Jewish life within it. He was the demonstration that inside that context children had to develop adults’ skills and had to learn how to survive on their own.

The subsequent interviews were conducted with Jakob Minski and Julian Weinberg, aged 39 and 56 respectively, who recounted their experiences from the standpoint of adult men with a broader awareness of the ghetto’s social and administrative structures. Both provided valuable information concerning the internal administration of the ghetto, the organization of labor, and the final phase preceding its liquidation. Minski had been deported to the Łódź Ghetto in October 1941 as part of a transport from Hamburg. Employed as a firefighter, he occupied a relatively privileged position within the ghetto’s hierarchy and was later deported on the last transport from Łódź to Auschwitz. His testimony is especially significant, as he was among the few survivors from the group of Western European Jews deported to Łódź in 1941. Moreover, his account includes important details about the fate of certain deportees from Łódź upon their arrival at Auschwitz—information rarely documented in other sources. He witnessed the “newly arrived Łódź Jewish police being targeted for death by the

² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski

³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

veteran inmates of Auschwitz” (Niewyk 1998, 300) as a form of revenge for their behavior in the ghetto.

From a sociological perspective, this episode underscores the enduring impact of the ghetto’s pyramidal and unequal social structure, which extended its effects even into the context of Auschwitz. Julian Weinberg, an engineer who had lived in Łódź his entire life, provides further insight into these dynamics. Following his dismissal from professional employment, he worked in a furniture detail within the ghetto. Remarkably, he and his family remained in the ghetto beyond its official liquidation in 1944, offering a rare account of those who experienced its final days from within: “his job in the furniture shop explains why he was one of some 800 Jews exempted from the final evacuation of the ghetto to clear it of valuables, including furniture in need of repair.” (Niewyk 1998, 182).

His position allowed him to observe and recall what happened after the last deportations, the same happened to Itzhak Brin. At the beginning of his interview, he told Boder that he did not want to talk about the complete story of the Łódź Ghetto, but he would rather pick some special moments. Both Brin’s and Weinberg’s interviews document the situation of the Jews in the last phase of the ghetto. Pinkhus Rosenfeld, who was interviewed the same day as Brin, used to work in the food distribution and could inform Boder about the food supplies and how the distribution system worked. He was deported to Auschwitz on 25 August 1944, along with his wife—who was murdered there—and his sons.

Rosenfeld’s testimony illustrates the immediate consequences of the German occupation for Jewish property owners. Prior to the war, he had been a textile manufacturer and owned a factory in Zduńska Wola. Once his business was confiscated by the occupying authorities, his family was left without any means of livelihood, exemplifying the systematic economic alienation that accompanied the broader process of persecution and exclusion.⁴ Each interviewee could provide an insight on the Łódź Ghetto from his perspective and according to his personal experiences and point of view. The analysis and the comparison of their interviews allows us to understand how the events affected the Jews and on which of them they focused more in building their narrative.

The selection of events recalled by the interviewees was shaped both by their personal experiences within the ghetto and by the questions of the interviewer. This dual influence underscores the mediated nature of their narratives: while rooted in individual memory, their accounts were also guided and structured by the interview context. As such, they should not be read in isolation but rather as fragments of a larger historical mosaic, because each interview offers a partial, situated perspective that, when examined alongside others, contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive reconstruction of life in the Łódź Ghetto.

Before the Ghetto

In less than one hundred years Łódź underwent an impressive development: from being a small village, it became an important economical and industrial centre where the Jews played a significant role both as entrepreneurs and as workers, mainly in the textile industry. According to Israel Gutman,⁵ the number of Jews resident in the city increased from 84 in 1808 to 233,000, about one third of the total population, in 1939. Among the interviewees, for instance, Krakowski’s father, who had lost his own factory in 1915, used to work in a textiles store, and Pinkhus Rosenfeld owned a textiles factory.

Even days before the German occupation of the city on September 8, 1939, panic spread among the population and about 70% of the Jews tried to leave. Mendel Herskovitz remembered that “a scare fell on the Jews when they found out that the Germans were near Łódź. On a Wednesday night began

⁴ On October 18th 1939 Jews were forbidden to trade in leather and textile goods. This ban was tantamount to complete elimination of the Łódź Jews from the market. The majority of the Jews was left without means. (http://www.Łódź-ghetto.com/litzmannstadt_ghetto_-_the_calendar.html,2-39)

⁵ See Israel Gutman, “The distinctiveness of the Łódź Ghetto,” in Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto. A History* (Bloomington, 2006), XXIX-LVII.

... people packed and began running farther [...] to be farther away from the Germans. I was also among them. I also ran.”⁶ Eventually he had to go back, like Pinkhus Rosenfeld: “at once we were running. We did not know where, what, or when.”⁷ Then he realised that “running was totally useless, so we turned around, and we came back to Łódź.”⁸

In those same days there was a centripetal movement towards Łódź. When the orphanage, where Israel Unikowski lived in Kalisz, was evacuated, he went with the other orphans to Łódź. They asked for help at the Jewish council and in that occasion, he met Rumkowski: “we were received by an old man completely gray.”⁹ After some hours, he put the orphans in the orphanage in Pomorska 19 where they stayed for two months. Itzhak Brin instead was sent from his hometown, Sieradz, to Łódź later, when the ghetto had already been established.

In November 1939 Łódź was annexed to the German Reich and included in the Warthegau. It became a German city, and its name was changed into Litzmannstadt on April 11, 1940. As soon as the Germans took over, they began implementing anti Jewish measures, which were issued one after the other quite quickly. Mendel Herskovitz told Boder that

on Rosh-Hashana [Jewish New Year] they entered...we remained until Pesach [Jewish Easter] till Pesach in '39 (1940). [...] until then there was still food...we traded a little and for the food we had to get up at three in the morning and stand in line for bread...and other such things...everything was already very hard.¹⁰

Julian Weinberg, who worked at the electricity plant of the city, had to leave his job and observed that the Jews

received such... [word not clear] marks of discrimination [??] as the armband, the yellow armband, so that we would be recognised on the streets as Jews. [...] Naturally the going about town was almost impossible for the Jews, because they were grabbed by the Germans on the streets. The Jews were [then] taken for most common labor. Regardless of who it was, whether he was a labourer or an intellectual, he had to perform the hardest forms of labor. I was compelled to scrub floors.¹¹

Weinberg experienced particular distress over the abrupt loss of his social status. At the beginning of his interview, he emphasized with evident pride his former position as a chief engineer, highlighting the psychological impact of his downward social mobility. The imposition of anti-Jewish measures—such as the curfew, mandatory wearing of yellow star badges, mass conscription for forced labor, as well as widespread expropriations and looting—compelled many Jews to flee the city in the initial months following the German occupation. As part of their broader plan to Germanize Łódź, the Nazis intended to expel the entire Jewish population. While this policy was implemented at first, escalating logistical challenges in organizing deportations to the General Government ultimately led the Germans to establish the ghetto as a provisional solution. Krakowski and his family were forced to leave at that time. “A part of the Jews was sent to various towns in the General Government; not all [of them]. The rest remained in Łódź in the Ghetto”¹²

⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

¹⁰ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

¹¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

¹² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski It is not possible to identify the exact date of Krakowski’s family resettlement, but the Germans began the resettlements to the General Gouvernement on December 12, 1939. They aimed at expelling all the Poles and the Jews from the areas annexed by the Third Reich.

The Ghetto: “The worst part of the town was taken, and all the Jews were squeezed in there”¹³

The Łódź Ghetto was one of the first ghettos established by the Germans in occupied Poland (February 1940) and also the most long-lasting, since it was sealed on 30 April 1940 and liberated by the Red Army in January 1945. The ghetto occupied an area of four-square meters which comprised “the worse section of the city,”¹⁴ Bałuty, Stare Miasto (Old Town), and Marysin. These areas were poorly equipped: the buildings were mostly wooden houses, which did not have electricity nor a sewage system.



The wooden footbridge built over Zgierska Street in the Łódź Ghetto.

Zgierska Street, which was important for city traffic, cut right through the ghetto.

Since the Nazis didn't want to reroute “Aryan” traffic, they divided the ghetto into sections on either side of the street, and in 1941 they ordered the construction of a wooden bridge so Jews could cross over without stepping onto the German-controlled street below, which was forbidden to them (Yad Vashem Photo Archives, 7261/24 – Courtesy of the German National Archive [Bundesarchiv])

The Jews, impoverished, deprived of every possession, were forced to leave their houses, their remaining belongings and move to this crowded and unhealthy area: “all the Jews were squeezed in there. There were, I believe, a hundred and forty thousand people inside quite a very small area.”¹⁵ The ghetto was entirely cut off from the rest of the city—and from the outside world—by barbed wire fencing that enclosed its guarded perimeter, reinforced by a designated no man's land that further ensured its physical and symbolic isolation.

As Isaiah Trunk stressed, “the Łódź Ghetto had certain characteristics that make it deserving of a special study. It was a ghetto with a pronounced character and of a special type.” (Trunk 2006, xvii) Isolation actually was one of its main features and played a significant role in its inhabitants' lives

¹³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski

¹⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

¹⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski

since they depended on the meagre food rations provided by the Germans and could not usually smuggle food from the Aryan side of the city. In addition to that, they could hardly get any information from the outside and were mostly unaware of the fate awaiting them. Another fundamental aspect, which differentiated it from other ghettos, was its organization: Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial leader of the Jewish Council, believed that work and production of goods in the industrial infrastructures of the city would have saved at least a part of the Jews from resettlement. Therefore, Łódź became a huge opencast factory where all the inhabitants worked as slave laborers for the Germans. Those who could not or did not work were doomed to starve or to be deported and killed. Pinkhus Rosenfeld resumed the functioning of the ghetto economy:

[...] it was some sort of self-government with its own currency with some sort of self-sufficiency, that we were working for the Germans in all the shops and in every trade. And for that the Germans sent in for us the most meager, that means the minimum, food supplies and certain rations. On that we lived in the ghetto.¹⁶

Hunger, forced labor, and isolation consistently emerge as central themes across all the interviews.

Chronology

Time functions as a social framework through which the activities and experiences of social groups are structured, sequenced, and later recalled. Boder's interviews reveal that certain key events emerged as temporal anchors in the collective memory of ghetto inhabitants, shaping the internal chronology by which survivors narrated their experiences. These events, which had a profound emotional and existential impact, served as the organizing nodes around which memories were constructed. One such pivotal moment was the establishment and eventual sealing of the ghetto, widely perceived by the Jews as a definitive rupture in their life, a boundary between past and present.

As Mendel Herskovitz recounted to Boder, approximately three weeks before Pesach,

the Jews were notified that the ... there was a part of Łódź that was called Balut [this was the slum] ... hm... that all the Jews had to live together in one quarter. It was called, naturally, a ghetto. On the second day of Pesach (*April 12*) in the last days, we arose in the morning. We saw that the ghetto was fenced in. (with wires and German soldiers).¹⁷

And Israel Unikowski:

And on Passover, on the first day of the mid-week an order came out. The ghetto is being closed. Every Jew who will be encountered in the city ... will be ... gets the death penalty. In the meantime, wires were installed around and around the ghetto. Every fifty meters stood a German guard.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that the temporal references employed by the interviewees were often drawn from the religious calendar—a natural framework given that the events were recalled from a distinctly Jewish perspective. In fact, as Samuel Gringauz remarks,

from the sociological point of view the ghetto was a unique social experience. It was a form of a national and autonomous Jewish concentration in which the conditions of existence were determined by a policy of persecution and annihilation imposed from without. (Gringauz 1950, 66)

¹⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

¹⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

¹⁸ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

Unikowski remembered that after the sealing he had to move to an orphanage inside the ghetto on Dworska, 10. Since the ‘resettlement’ operation carried out by the Germans one block after the other was very violent,¹⁹ Julian Weinberg observed that

the following days all the Jews went to the ghetto on their own. So, although it [the resettlement] was to last a week, all the Jews left the town on their own, because they have seen the inhuman methods with which the Jews were treated. And so, we were taken to the ghetto on foot; [...] The Ghetto of Łódź was completely isolated from the city... the worse section of the city.²⁰

At first, people were able to survive selling their belongings or using the money they had managed to keep or hide, as the same Weinberg remembered: “At the beginning people still lived ... Everybody still had some money which he took with him ... and some people had taken some food also, provisions. And one could manage the first few days.”²¹ Israel Unikowski too observed that then “Food was still a little easier to get. But this lasted a short time.”²² Pinkhus Rosenfeld had previously gone to Warsaw where he had left part of his family. Since they did not have enough money to survive there, he went back to Łódź where, he told Boder, “We still had buried a little Polish money.”²³ His plan was to take the money and go back to Warsaw. They returned to Łódź before Pesach “there was already established a ghetto, already with all the trappings.”²⁴ He tried to escape again “five days before Pesach” but did not succeed “And on the thirtieth [day] of the fourth [month] the ghetto was to be closed.”²⁵

The second major event the survivors remembered was the appointment of the Jewish Council with his leader, Chaim Rumkowski. He had been the Chairman of the Jewish congregation from 12 September, and had been appointed Elder of the Jews on 13 October 1939. Nonetheless, the interviewees who were inside the ghetto from its beginning usually mentioned him as the ‘president’ only after the sealing of the ghetto: before that Rumkowski was not perceived as powerful as he became later. Herskovitz, for instance, told Boder: “There was a president Rumkowski. A Jew who before the war was the head of the orphanages. And, in the ghetto, he became the Elder of Jews.”²⁶

Another chronological step recalled by the interviewees concerned the deportations. As Unikowski observed: “The hunger, the need, and the epidemics still were not able to break the ghetto. The worst thing in the ghetto were the deportations... It was nineteen forty-two ... they began to send away thousands of people.”²⁷ At that time, in September 1942 the deportation of the children and of the old and sick people occurred. That episode in particular marked the memory of the interviewees since it was extremely traumatic and directly affected them and their families: “the most terrible event in the Ghetto of Łódź was the *Sperre* ... It was about ten days before Rosh Hashona.”²⁸ As was customary, the date was expressed with reference to Jewish holidays, which constituted the primary temporal framework of the community. Additionally, the closure of the ghetto and the subsequent raid were described using the German term employed by the Nazis at the time—language that had become embedded in the vernacular of the persecuted as a way to denote such events.

Pinkhus Rosenfeld explained to Boder the way people were then selected for deportations: first the so-called criminals, then single people, who generally were from the provinces and had already

¹⁹ 6 March 1940 is remembered as the bloody Thursday, since the Germans conducted an Aktion to transfer the Jews to the ghetto. They ordered the people living in Piotrkowska street to get ready and leave immediately. Those who refused to do that were killed on the spot.

²⁰ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

²¹ Ibidem

²² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

²³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

²⁴ Ibidem

²⁵ Ibidem

²⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

²⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

²⁸ Ibidem

lost their families, then the children and the sick: “This took place in the space of time from the 5th of September until the 12th 1942. Two thousand children...”²⁹ The deportations in 1944 marked another step: “In nineteen forty-four, in the beginning, there came again a deportation, it was already carried out with another system. Every factory had to surrender fifty per cent of the people to be sent away.”³⁰

Then in the summer there was “the general deportation of the Ghetto of Łódź. They started to send people, five thousand persons a day. It became gradually worse and worse. There was no more order. There was no way out.”³¹ This is how the event was remembered by Unikowski, who was sent to Birkenau at that time.

Chronology was marked also by the epidemics which affected the ghetto: first dysentery and typhus, then tuberculosis. In his testimony Unikowski declared: “The first epidemic in the Ghetto of Łódź was dysentery. People died like flies.”³² Then Minski told Boder that the typhus epidemic killed many of the ‘Western’ Jews, that was after October 1941. Unikowski again, talking about the deportations in 1944, explained: “Beside the deportation there had reigned at that time in the ghetto terrible epidemics of lung disease [...] in the ghetto there were, out of a hundred per cent of the people, there were sixty, seventy per cent sick with tuberculosis.”³³ Memories of these events were strong because they affected the interviewees personally and changed ghetto’s inhabitants’ daily life.

Topography

“There was a part of Łódź that was called Balut (*Baluty*) [this was the slum] that all the Jews had to live together. It was called naturally a ghetto.”³⁴ The ghetto constituted not the physical and the social space within which the interviewees experienced the events they later recounted to Boder. Certain locations acquired particular significance in their memories and were often associated with traumatic or pivotal moments. A preliminary distinction must be made between open or public spaces and enclosed or private interiors. Strikingly, the interviewees’ recollections focus almost exclusively on the former. None of them, with the exception of Itzhak Brin—who mentioned entering apartments as part of his work with a post-liquidation cleaning unit—spoke about the interiors of the dwellings where they lived. This absence reflects the reality of daily life in the Łódź Ghetto, which unfolded primarily in public spaces such as workshops, streets, and squares. Overcrowding, the pressure of forced labor, and the lack of material and psychological privacy made the maintenance of familial and domestic life extraordinarily difficult. The events that shaped the survivors’ memories occurred predominantly in communal or outdoor settings—at the train station, in the streets, at public gatherings, or within the cemetery.

These spaces functioned not only as the physical backdrop of daily life in the ghetto but also as symbolic sites where trauma was experienced and memory was anchored. For instance, Israel Unikowski managed to escape the children’s deportation through the Beth Olom cemetery. That same cemetery later became the site where Itzhak Brin and other Jews were compelled to dig graves for Poles executed by the Germans following the ghetto’s liquidation. The Beth Hachaim cemetery also served earlier in the war as a transit point for Jews attempting to flee the ghetto: Pinkhus Rosenfeld, together with his wife and sons, sought to escape through it in an effort to reunite with his daughters in Warsaw, but the attempt failed.

Another place that acquired deep symbolic meaning was the Gosciny Dwór, where Chaim Rumkowski delivered his infamous speech urging the deportation of children—a moment that etched itself into the collective memory of the ghetto’s inhabitants as a defining trauma. Unikowski also referred to three different orphanage locations that marked his personal trajectory: the first at 19

²⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

³⁰ Ibidem

³¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

³² Ibidem

³³ Ibidem

³⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

Pomorska Street, opposite the offices of the Jewish Community; the second on 10 Dworska Street, within the ghetto, to which he was relocated after the Germans took over the first building; and finally, the orphanage in Marysin, from which the children were eventually taken to the assembly point during the deportation. Hospitals, too, emerged as significant sites within the topography of memory in several testimonies, often associated with both care and vulnerability, as well as the threat of selection and deportation. Unikowski went to visit his dying brother everyday and told Boder: “I came everyday to the hospital. One can’t imagine what a hospital looked like in the ghetto!”³⁵ Weinberg too mentioned them as the places from where people were taken out to be deported in September 1942. Therefore, hospitals—typically associated with care and healing—became sites of fear, threat, and danger within the ghetto, symbolizing not recovery but the risk of deportation and death.

Rumkowski

In all the studies about Łódź Chaim Rumkowski occupies a relevant place. His controversial figure as the head of the Jewish Council in the Łódź Ghetto has been studied and interpreted more than any other Jewish leader in the ghettos. His role as ‘president’ of the second largest ghetto in Poland and his peculiar features have been debated by many historians and Holocaust scholars or writers. Philip Friedman defined Rumkowski “a pseudo-savior” one of those ghetto leaders “who believed that they would manage to save at least a portion of their people by autocratic deeds in the spirit of the German Führer.” (Friedman 1980, 334). The Polish historian remarked that not only ambition and “desire of power and honor,” but also the “feeling of a historical mission” had motivated him. He recognized that the Elder, not a coward, took his role very seriously and had good organizational skills. His biggest mistake was that he did not understand the Germans’ purposes and the role he was playing in that, until was too late.

Isaiah Trunk was also extremely critical in judging Rumkowski, whom he defined as a “despotic autocrat” (2006, 314) and a “heartless bureaucrat” (2006, 317) who had a “decisive influence on the formation of the inner conditions of the ghetto.” (2006, 313). He was one of those people who Primo Levi included in the “gray zone”, that moral area where the distinction between good and evil, victims and perpetrators, is blurred:

If he had survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto which he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor certainly can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Łódź merchant, together with his entire generation, was fragile. (Levi 1988, 49)

In analyzing the role of the Jewish Councils and the actions of their leaders, it is essential to acknowledge that, unlike our retrospective understanding, they were often unaware of the full scope of the German plans. They did not foresee that the ghettos would serve as a preliminary stage in a broader process of deportation and extermination, nor that their “forced cooperation” (Trunk 1976, 570) would ultimately contribute to the machinery of annihilation. They tried to find a way to save as many people as possible from a mostly unknown fate. Some of them, like Rumkowski, believed that work could have been a solution: the Jews could survive if they were considered to be essential for the Germans’ economy and war effort.

Within an unprecedented context—isolated from the outside world—Rumkowski established a regime that was not only perceived as autocratic but functioned as such in practice. While he was obligated to carry out German orders, he also saw himself as entrusted with the mission of saving the Jewish community, a mission he pursued in accordance with his own personality and principles. It

³⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

was precisely this perception of agency that led many within the ghetto to believe that his decisions were autonomous, and that he bore direct responsibility for their consequences.

What did the survivors interviewed by David Boder in 1946 think of him? Given the proximity to the events, and the emotional and psychological weight they still carried, the interviewees' judgments were deeply shaped by the immediacy of the tragedy. Several recurring memories about Rumkowski appear across the testimonies, forming a kind of collective narrative. Foremost among them is his association with children—both in terms of his apparent concern for their welfare and, more tragically, his role in their deportation in September 1942. Rosenfeld defined him with these words: “A man who was childless. A man who had done much for orphans.”³⁶ Actually, before the war he had been the director of the orphanage in Helenówek and, also in the ghetto, he took care of the orphans. When Israel Unikowski and the other orphans from Kalisz arrived in Łódź, and they met Rumkowski. “The old man, who was the [one] later known as President Rumkowski, stopped us, read the petition,³⁷ and answered us, Dear children, I have nothing to help you.”³⁸ But later, in the afternoon, he solved the problem and put them in the orphanage in Pomorska 19. When the situation in the ghetto became worse, Unikowski remembered that the majority of the people hated the President but “Us children he treated very well.”³⁹ Nevertheless, in August 1942, when the Germans ordered the deportation of 20,000 Jews, Rumkowski declared that to save the ghetto it would have been better to deport the unproductive part, such as young children and sick people, in order to save the others. About that Pinkhus Rosenfeld told Boder:

Rumkowski came out seemingly with such a broken spirit. How much truth there lay in it we did not know, because we already knew that he has sold out to the Germans... But it is not believable that he did want [covet] so much, that he did not foresee that he will have to serve the Germans with so much. But now he already had to.⁴⁰

He heard then Rumkowski delivering “the most infamous speech in the being of the ghetto.”⁴¹ He remembered that “he gave us to understand that we must save ourselves, and that it is a decree ... Save ourselves, and with that, that we will hand over the small children...”⁴² Rumkowski called that “the last burned offering [sacrifice].” (*der letzter khorbn* in Yiddish). The reaction to that request was dramatic: “Naturally, there arose a screaming, wailing. “You lunatic, down from the platform, people screamed.”⁴³ Many children were hidden or managed to escape.

But the Germans saw that they have too few children. And Rumkowski, who like always, never refused... took and handed over the orphanages, the orphanage where I was. [...] At that time there were in the orphanage, in the so-called children's colony, one thousand two hundred children. [...] In the morning there came to us a messenger, and [he] said that around eleven o'clock we are leaving for the square there and there. And naturally, perish the thought, we won't be sent away. The German only wants to take a look at us. We should dress nicely, and we shouldn't worry about anything. [...] Jewish police, fire-fighters, chimney sweepers... whoever wore a hat, and a uniform surrounded us, with a triple line [?]. Wagons began to arrive. We began to run away, but it wasn't possible because there were police around and around. [...] When they surrounded us from three sides, when we saw the wagons arriving, we got together five or six boys, and we ran over to the fence.⁴⁴

³⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

³⁷ A letter with a request to help the orphans had been written by the Kalish community and was addressed to the Jewish community in Łódź.

³⁸ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

³⁹ Ibidem

⁴⁰ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁴¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁴² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁴³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁴⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

Israel and other four children hid for eight days; when they went back to the orphanage, it was empty. They managed to survive by themselves since they had acquired early practical skills which allowed them to face the harshness of the life in the ghetto.

In addition to the significance of this testimony in reconstructing the events surrounding the deportation of the children, it is noteworthy to examine what emerges regarding Rumkowski. Unikowski's account suggests that he perceived Rumkowski as consistently compliant with German orders. This recollection sheds light on the forced cooperation and the complex dynamics between Rumkowski and the German authorities. In the testimonies, Rumkowski is often seen as responsible for implementing the Germans' directives. At times, the interviewees seem to suggest that he was not merely an executor of orders but, rather, an individual who made key decisions within the ghetto, further complicating the understanding of his role. About the deportation of the children and the weakest people of the ghetto, Rosenfeld observed that "it looked as if, that generally [in fact], the German had not [given?] such [?] an order, but we were gripped by such horror that we thought that we must comply at once."⁴⁵ Apparently, people in the ghetto, like Rosenfeld, were not completely sure about the origin of the orders. Rumkowski had become such a central figure and had displayed his 'apparent' power so much that people believed he was responsible for decisions which actually came from the Germans. According to Itzhak Brin: "Rumkowski was very ... a leader of the German powers. Everything had to be exact. Everything that he got from Amtsleiter Biebow. He with the help of his police carried out precisely. [unintelligible]. He was a very strong person, huge. [unintelligible]."⁴⁶

Julian Weinberg explained to Boder that he did not want to be involved in the council and participated "little in the community affairs"⁴⁷ since he did not like Rumkowski's overbearingness and his obedience to the Germans: "He received the orders directly ... the orders from the ghetto management, and he afterwards executed the orders..."⁴⁸ About the relation between Rumkowski and the Germans, Jacob Minski observed: "[he was] an exploiter in favour of the Germans. If the Germans [demanded] a hundred percent [production], he would deliver a hundred and fifty percent."⁴⁹ The fact that Rumkowski promptly executed the orders led people in the ghetto to think that he "was eighty percent for the Germans...and 20% for the Jews. He did what he could to aid the Germans rather than the Jews..."⁵⁰ And Mendel Herzkoviz commented: "Everybody thought that he was an exploiter of the Jews."⁵¹

Another aspect which is connected with Rumkowski's role is his authoritarian power and people's reaction to that. Everybody in Łódź knew who he was before the war:

The Elder of the Jews was Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. In Łódź he was known. The man was a Jewish community worker... At the time when the German marched to Łódź, he was one of the Jewish civic leaders... because of his patriarchal appearance he [the Germans] made him remain. The rest, all the civic leaders, he sent away to Dachau where they perished. And in this way, he took over the complete leadership.⁵²

The ghetto was "Rumkowski's kingdom."⁵³ Here Rosenfeld provided an explanation to Rumkowski's appointment and to his power, trying to make sense of what happened to the members

⁴⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁴⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin

⁴⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

⁴⁸ Ibidem

⁴⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

⁵⁰ Ibidem

⁵¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁵² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁵³ Ibidem

of the first Council, who often disagreed with the leader and suddenly were arrested. Rumkowski then chose the members of the second Council among people he knew would have obeyed his orders.

According to Jacob Minski, “Rumkowski was actually like a king; he behaved...if according to his theory ... according to his point of view every person belonged ... belonged to him.”⁵⁴ And he seemed to have the traditional prerogatives of a king, like that of minting coins: “There was in ghetto Jewish money. This money had a Star of David ... with a Star of David, signed Rumkowski Chaim, and for this money we could get things. For this money we could buy things in the ghetto. Naturally, outside of the ghetto this money was worthless.”⁵⁵ Of course, he could not have done that without the permission of the Germans, who could easily exploit the Jews without any economic issues, but his signature there and his ubiquitous power led people to call this money *chaimka o rumka*. Even stamps, valid only inside the ghetto, were printed with his face on them. Children like Israel Unikowski could understand that: “He wasn’t just president. He was a Kaiser [emperor], one may say. His word was as from a dictator.”⁵⁶

It is noteworthy that the words used by the survivors to define his power are linked to the semantic field of autocracy: kaiser, king, kingdom, emperor, dictator. This is the reason why most of the people did not like him: “One can say that out of a hundred per cent of the ghetto there was ninety-five per cent who hated him terribly. A few times attempts on his life were made. They wanted to kill him.... But he had with him the German might. ... And nothing happened to him.”⁵⁷ Rumkowski was considered responsible for the selections during the deportations, what people asked themselves was: “How they were chosen? This is THE question. This is the greatest guilt [crime] of Rumkowski without question [?]. People that were sick, weak and old were taken.”⁵⁸ In addition, Rumkowski imposed severe penalties on individuals selected for deportation who failed to report to the designated assembly point, employing the threat of starvation as a means to deter attempts at hiding. “For this Rumkowski had a good remedy. To the store where he received his food rations was sent... such and such a man does not receive any more bread.”⁵⁹ Within the Łódź ghetto—where smuggling was virtually impossible and food distribution was strictly controlled by the Jewish Council—being denied access to bread rations was effectively a death sentence. This context helps to explain why Unikowski recalled an episode with particularly grave consequences for the ghetto’s inhabitants, and for which Rumkowski was widely blamed: “A lot, a lot of potatoes was brought into the ghetto. And when it was asked of Rumkowski why he doesn’t distribute them, he answered, ‘You have no business to meddle in my affairs. I’ll distribute the potatoes when I want!’”⁶⁰ The potatoes eventually rotted and became inedible; they were buried and covered with chlorine. Yet, for the next three years, starving individuals continued to search for them in the area where they were believed to have been disposed of. In the early phase of the ghetto’s existence, food distribution was managed by house committees, but it quickly became evident that the system was rife with corruption. Then, “Rumkowski remedied this. It may be considered in favour of Rumkowski that he didn’t permit theft.”⁶¹ In an attempt to address the dysfunction and corruption of the house committee system, the Eldest of the ghetto introduced a centralized food distribution network through designated distribution centers.

However, Rumkowski’s authority—once largely unquestioned—began to wane following the mass deportations of 1942, particularly after the traumatic events of the so-called “Sperre” and the forced removal of children. These events deeply eroded his legitimacy in the eyes of many ghetto inhabitants, who increasingly questioned both his decisions and his motivations. At that time Biebow deprived him of “two crucial aspects of the ghetto management” (Trunk 2006, xi), the labor apparatus

⁵⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

⁵⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁵⁶ Ibidem

⁵⁷ Ibidem

⁵⁸ Ibidem

⁵⁹ Ibidem

⁶⁰ Ibidem

⁶¹ Ibidem

and the supply division, which was transferred to David Gertler, who was a Gestapo agent and the head of the ghetto police. Israel Unikowski mentioned him since in the first phase, 1940, he could smuggle people out of the Ghetto to Warsaw: “He began to take people out of the ghetto illegally. Illegally and legally. That means the Germans knew about it. It has cost two hundred or three hundred marks per person.”⁶²

Food and Hunger

The Łódź ghetto was hermetically isolated, very poor-quality food supplies were provided by the Germans in exchange for what the Jews produced in the factories inside the ghetto, smuggling was impossible or extremely dangerous, the rations scarce, and the inflation significantly affected the prices. Hunger, a central and omnipresent reality in the Łódź Ghetto, played a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relations and the broader social fabric. As food became increasingly scarce, access to it turned into a key marker of power and privilege. Those who were part of the administrative or industrial structures—particularly individuals employed in Rumkowski’s bureaucracy or in essential workshops—often had better chances of survival due to slightly improved rations or opportunities for barter. Conversely, the most vulnerable—children, the elderly, and the unemployed—faced near-certain starvation. This stratification exacerbated existing inequalities and led to tensions, resentment, and moral dilemmas within the community. In this context, social cohesion often gave way to individual strategies of survival, and acts of solidarity were as frequent as betrayal or indifference. Food was the main concern for the interviewees, this is evident because, in their testimonies, episodes and events revolved around it. During the first weeks after the ghetto was sealed, “began the tragic time of the ghetto. People started to swell up from hunger. A deka...a deka of sugar did cost twenty marks.”⁶³ People “began to receive very little food.”⁶⁴ Also young boys, like Mendel Herskovitz, felt the responsibility of helping their parents:

So whichever way we could help ourselves, we helped [ourselves] so that the family at home also had...also did...hungered much less because of...that...that I helped to earn, so that there should be more food in the house.⁶⁵

Jacob Minski, who was deported to Łódź with a transport from Hamburg in October 1941, gave an interesting testimony about the different values of products in the ghetto:

It was this way for a long time, that the values of objects ... in general, had no special values, while foodstuffs... had an unbelievable value. I remember, for instance, I had a new suit of clothes with me among other things—a new suit of clothes for which I paid 350 Marks in Hamburg. So you see, it was quite a piece of wealth. And I got one kilo of flour for it. You could purchase a pair...a pair of shoes for a hundred grams of margarine; and you see that from these prices things, objects other than food or cigarettes, were worth nothing. [...] Then, for the sake of saving one’s life, one was ready to sacrifice all these things.⁶⁶

The same Minski, who was later in Auschwitz, considered hunger the worst issue in the ghetto: as a fireman he earned three ghetto marks per day, the cost of bread at the black market was 1,800 marks. The price of goods in the Łódź Ghetto fluctuated significantly based on availability, with scarcity often driving dramatic increases. Soup tickets and bread rations, essential for survival, were frequently exchanged or sold in informal markets to obtain other necessities. Pinkhus Rosenfeld

⁶² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁶³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁶⁴ Ibidem

⁶⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁶⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

described himself as relatively fortunate, as he served as the head of a local provisioning point in one area of the ghetto, which allowed him access to slightly more food. He explained to Boder that provisions were generally distributed on a biweekly basis and included approximately thirty grams of turnip with no fats, while bread rations amounted to two kilograms every eight days. The extreme scarcity of food also gave rise to illicit acts—such as theft and even murder—as survival strategies. Following successive deportations and the resulting decline in population, food became relatively more abundant. Itzhak Brin, one of those who remained in a part of the ghetto (*the camp*) after its official liquidation, recalled to Boder:

The food was also very good in the camp, because large warehouses remained full of food for the whole ghetto—seventy thousand Jews, so there was food remaining, certainly enough to feed eight hundred people, especially if the Germans wanted us to work fast. They told us to eat as much as we wanted, because they wanted the work to go as fast as possible.⁶⁷

The Germans

The Germans were the rulers of the ghetto, but, except for some of them who were well known, they are usually remembered as an indistinct group of perpetrators. Their main characteristic was their deceiving attitude: Israel Unikowski remembered when the Viennese entered the ghetto.

They came in from [conditions of] utter abundance. There were among them Jews who even had served in the German army. When we asked them why they were sent to the ghetto they said that the Germans want to protect them from the bombs, because where they are [from], there are severe bombings and here there are no bombings. You know the German Jews!⁶⁸ In such a way people were deceived.⁶⁹

The same Unikowski, who managed to hide during the deportation of the children, told Boder “We already knew then that under the Germans to be sent away is not one of the simplest things. That we are not going ... that we are not going to pick radishes or leaves, but we are really going to [our] death.”⁷⁰

By September 1942, rumors concerning the true fate of the deportees had begun to circulate within the ghetto. Yet, for many, the reality was too horrific to accept. The Jewish leadership—who may have had a clearer understanding of the deportations’ actual destination—chose to remain silent. Julian Weinberg, in his interview with Boder, revealed that even as late as August 1944, during the final phase of the ghetto’s liquidation, many still believed the Germans’ assurances. They were told that the deportations were part of a resettlement plan, aimed at transferring Jews to Germany for labor under improved conditions. The narrative was also framed as a protective measure, allegedly intended to shield Jews from the dangers posed by the advancing Eastern Front. Another characteristic of the Germans the survivors remembered was their rapacity. Minski, for instance, told that they took advantage of the products sold in the ghetto in exchange for food: among them, “who would at times come into the ghetto with one pound of bread or margarine, would afterwards leave with a trunkful of new things.”⁷¹

The economical advantages of the exploitation of the Jews were the reason why Hans Biebow, whose name was mentioned and was well known among the Jews, was interested in preserving the

⁶⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin

⁶⁸ Polish Jews considered the German Jews naive and the relations between the different national groups were problematic.

⁶⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁷⁰ Ibidem

⁷¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

production. He was the head of the Nazi administration of the ghetto. “This Ghetto Council was actually an outgrowth of the...of the City Council. At the head of the Ghetto Council stood the famous Bieburg (Biebow). He was a German from Bremen. A merchant.”⁷²

He was not only the administrator of the ghetto, but took part in the deportations and in killing operations. Israel Unikowski saw him during the children deportation: “The fuehrer was then Hans Bubov (*sic*). He was the fuehrer of these selection.”⁷³ He arrived in the square where the children from the orphanage were being gathered, “He began to look [us] over. He passed through, one, two, three. He came over to a small boy of ten years. Oh, you little one. Do you know what is about to happen to you? You are all going to be shot.”⁷⁴ Itzhak Brin recalled that during the final phase of the ghetto, when he was part of the group assigned to remain behind and carry out post-liquidation tasks—known as the Clean-Up Unit—he was also compelled to dig mass graves for Polish prisoners who were about to be executed. One day, Biebow “appeared with another Gestapo official as we were coming from the digging, and he said...I just happened to hear, oh yes, “We will put the heads on this side, the feet on this side and the children here in the middle...”⁷⁵

Work

After the Germans entered the city, they began taking Jews for forced labor: “They drove around and caught people... Jews, to work, especially Jews.”⁷⁶ When the ghetto was closed, work became the only way to survive: the Jews “had to earn their living.”⁷⁷ Many factories, which produced several kinds of products, were created: “One simply cannot imagine the factories that were organized in the ghetto.”⁷⁸ Unikowski, despite his young age worked in a tailor factory and was paid with ghetto money, Pinkhus Rosenfeld’s children worked too: “Seeing that whoever will work will not be deported, and we already knew the odor of the deportation, so that even eight year old children were sent to work.”⁷⁹ As Jacob Minski told Boder: “Everyone could get a job in his own trade because the Łódź Ghetto, as the Germans ... as the Germans themselves claimed, [was] a model ghetto.”

Minski chose to join the fire department because he considered it a relatively “easy” position—less physically demanding than the twelve-hour shifts required in the ghetto’s factories. His role allowed him to remain in the ghetto until the final deportation transport. Although he was offered the opportunity to stay longer as part of the Clean-Up Unit, he opted to leave, under the belief—still widely held at the time—that he was being sent to Germany for labor. Approximately 860 individuals, including Weinberg and Brin, remained in the ghetto to carry out post-liquidation tasks. Their duties included cleaning the area and collecting various materials, such as valuables and furniture requiring repair. Men and women were housed separately in two factory buildings, which had “become some kind of lager”⁸⁰ where they were subjected to strict rules and discipline. Before the liquidation Weinberg had worked in the furniture shop, this may be the reason why he was kept in the ghetto and exempted from the deportation. Even though there was no active armed resistance in Łódź, Weinberg revealed to Boder that the Jews resisted in other ways. Since work and production were the main goals, and the Jews did not want to work for the Germans, they carried out “a kind of silent sabotage against” them. They worked slow.

⁷² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

⁷³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁷⁴ Ibidem

⁷⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin

⁷⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁷⁷ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

⁷⁸ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁷⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁸⁰ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

Social Conditions

Immediately from the beginning of the German occupation, Jews were deprived of their money and their social status was seriously affected. Julian Weinberg, an engineer, lost his job and his position. He remarked that it did not matter whether an individual was an intellectual or a laborer, they were both “grabbed by the Germans on the streets [...]” and “had to perform the hardest forms of labor.”⁸¹ And intellectuals were usually treated much worse. An episode like that happened to him at the beginning of March 1940, while he was returning home after his mother burial in the cemetery where he was alone, nobody else could attend.

Family life was affected as well. Families were separated, often for ever: Pinkhus Rosenfeld’s relatives were scattered between Warsaw and Łódź from the beginning of the occupation. According to Trunk, family became a “work cell” (Trunk 2006, 299) where each member used to work all day, thus also the traditional gendered family roles underwent a radical modification. The harsh living conditions within the ghetto caused changes in social norms: social behaviors which previously were not accepted became ordinary. Several reasons took people to adjust their morality and habits to the new deculturated environment. The most important was chronic hunger which led people to steal. Herskovitz told Boder: “I did hunger...Even in the ghetto I did also. Among us it was called ‘organizing’... Too kosher it was not, but for the hungry one it was called kosher.”⁸² Thefts were severely punished though; they became a reason why people considered criminal were included in the deportation lists:

If one had stolen once a piece of wood from an old fence,⁸³ or if a cart with potatoes passed on the street and a child of five years ran after it and grabbed a raw potato, this constituted already one of the worst crimes, for which they were in the first line, and these were sent away.⁸⁴

Interpersonal relations too were deeply affected by the living conditions. Replying to Boder who asked about sex life in the ghetto, Minski told him that, on the one hand, the sex drive was “suppressed by protracted starvation and continuous terror,”⁸⁵ on the other prostitution was rampant: girls sold themselves for a slice of bread in the corners of the streets or in the yards.⁸⁶

The social condition of the deportees from Germany, Austria and the Protectorate⁸⁷ needs to be analyzed separately, at least at the beginning. Julian Weinberg thought that their inability “to adjust rapidly to the hard living conditions in the ghetto”⁸⁸ caused the death of 90% of them. Among the interviewees only Jacob Minski was from the group of Western Jews. At their arrival they were assembled in a school, “it was in frightful conditions.”⁸⁹ The newcomers were shocked by the hygienic conditions which, according to Minski, were “worse than in a concentration camp.” They “were unable to imagine what that meant to live in a Łódź ghetto.”⁹⁰ According to Isaiah Trunk:

It is easy to imagine the really catastrophic change that occurred in the life of these people from the moment they arrived in the Łódź Ghetto. Although in their hometowns they had also been persecuted, humiliated, and robbed, they had still not lived in ghettos. Their material conditions, in comparison with the living standard of a Łódź Ghetto, had been truly light-years away. (Trunk 2006, 307)

⁸¹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

⁸² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁸³ People used to burn pieces of furniture, doors, parts of fences to heat their apartments. About the internal conditions in the ghetto see Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto*, 297.

⁸⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁸⁵ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

⁸⁶ Isaiah Trunk remarked that hunger and exhaustion played a significant role in the decrease of sex life. (Trunk 2006, 300). At the same time overcrowding and promiscuity were both aggravating factors and weakened modesty and decency.

⁸⁷ In fall 1941 about 23,000 Western Jews and Jews expelled from the provinces were deported to the Łódź ghetto.

⁸⁸ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

⁸⁹ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

Only three people from that transport survived: most of them starved to death, part of them died from typhus, many were “resettled” quite soon because they could not or did not accept a job.⁹¹ They were either too old or they thought that the war could not last for ever.

Rumors and Information

The isolation of the ghetto was such that no information came from outside and the “Jews...Till a year before the end of the war, they did not know that people are being sent into the oven...It was said...the forty-five thousand people... it was said...they were sent to work... to the peasants.”⁹² Rosenfeld confirmed Herskovitz’s words, in 1942 they “did not know where they were sent...wee did think somehow that the children would perhaps be taken to Germany.”⁹³ Rumors and hearsay spread among the Jews in the ghetto especially in the most tragic moments or about critical topics: the deportations, the availability of food, the war. As Kuperstein observed:

The Ghetto of Łódź is an ideal social aggregate for an investigation of how rumors contributed to the creation of an emotional and intellectual atmosphere, a particular public frame of mind within a certain period of time in the ghetto's history. (Kuperstein 1973, 66).

Rumors regarding the fate of the deportees emerged as a form of psychological rationalization and collective consolation, reflecting the ghetto inhabitants’ efforts to impose meaning on an otherwise incomprehensible and terrifying reality. In a context marked by extreme uncertainty, isolation, and fear, such narratives functioned as coping mechanisms—allowing individuals to maintain hope and resist psychological collapse. Denial and selective interpretation of available information became survival strategies, deeply intertwined with the need to preserve a sense of normalcy and control. Even when fragments of truth emerged, the leadership often remained silent or ambiguous, further reinforcing a system in which rumor filled the vacuum left by official information. As a result, many clung to the belief that deportations were resettlements, rather than preludes to annihilation.

Unikowski told Boder that the Jews deceived themselves about that: after the deportation in 1942, the ghetto received thousands of kilos of radishes, “from every radish the leaves were cut off.”⁹⁴ The Jews thought that the leaves had been cut by the children and the old people who had recently been deported. This rumor, like others, provided a false sense of hope for the population, allowing them to endure the extreme uncertainty. However, Unikowski emphasized the brutal reality, making it clear that the deportees were not heading to fields to “pick radishes or leaves”⁹⁵ as some believed, but rather to their deaths. Jacob Minski, who left the ghetto with the last transport to Auschwitz, told Boder that he had no idea they were going to a concentration camp. The explanation he gave was that in the ghetto they “were actually cut off from the outside world.”⁹⁶ Nonetheless, there was a source of information: clandestine radios.⁹⁷ Brin said that there was one in the ghetto, “and we learned what was going on politically.”⁹⁸ Isaiah Trunk confirmed that

⁹¹ About the situation of the Western Jews in Łódź ghetto see Isaiah Trunk 2006, 309-10.

⁹² https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel

⁹³ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

⁹⁴ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski

⁹⁵ Ibidem

⁹⁶ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski

⁹⁷ Actually, there were more but probably Brin referred to the one which was still active after the liquidation of the ghetto.

⁹⁸ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin

a group of clandestine radio listeners was active in the ghetto during the five years of its existence. Day and night they would listen by means of specially constructed sets (all regular sets had been turned over to the occupation authorities as early as December 1939) to the news from the free world and disseminate it throughout the ghetto. (Trunk 1981, 331).

The group of people who listened and spread the news had been known inside the ghetto for years but was denounced by an informer in June 1944. They were all arrested, killed or committed suicide. Trunk confirmed what Brin said about the news reaching the cleaning group in the ghetto: “the Jewish Clearance Commando (*Aufräumungskommando*) recruited by Biebow inside the liquidated ghetto in the fall of 1944 received news over a secret radio.” (Trunk 1981, 332). Julian Weinberg, who was in the same group, stressed the importance of the radio for his survival: “You must know that we had a concealed radio also in the lager. We knew, therefore, approximately how the events stood. And so three days before the liberation of the city we all hid ourselves.”⁹⁹

Conclusion

The interviews that Boder conducted in 1946 with survivors from the Łódź Ghetto offer a significant window into the lived experiences of Jewish individuals within the ghetto, revealing the complexity of life under such extreme conditions. These survivors, coming from diverse social backgrounds and holding different work positions, provide a multi-faceted view of the ghetto’s reality. Among them, two remained in the ghetto until its liberation, three were deported to Auschwitz during the final deportations, one was sent to various camps before the ghetto’s establishment, and another was deported to Częstochowa in 1943. Each of these individuals lost the majority of their family members either within the ghetto or after deportations, an element of their stories that highlights the trauma and widespread loss experienced by those who survived.

Despite the different paths and experiences of these survivors, common themes emerge across their testimonies—particularly regarding the chronology of events, the changing landscape and spaces within the ghetto, its organization, and the evolving social dynamics. These survivors’ accounts coincide on the major events that shaped the ghetto’s history and the persistent issues that its inhabitants had to face. The consistency across testimonies reinforces the idea that, despite the varied individual experiences, there was a shared reality that transcended personal conditions. As Boder noted in his interview with Pinkhus Rosenfeld: “It is important that we get it (information) from various corners of the world, and we get the same story.”¹⁰⁰ This remark underscores the significance of collecting testimonies from a broad spectrum of individuals: Łódź Ghetto’s story cannot be fully understood without these firsthand Jewish accounts. The survivors’ testimonies are crucial for constructing a comprehensive narrative of life in the ghetto, offering invaluable insights into how it was perceived by those who lived through it.

The ghetto itself existed in an isolated, hermetically sealed environment where traditional categories of time, space, and social organization no longer applied. Time was marked by a different calendar, often determined by Jewish holidays, which survivors referenced to help structure their recollections. Places, too, took on new meanings: the ghetto was not simply a geographical area, but a symbolic site of constant adaptation and survival. Work, as a critical part of life in the ghetto, became

⁹⁹https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg

¹⁰⁰ https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld

intertwined with the struggle to stay alive. It also transformed interpersonal relations, as the demands of labor—whether in the factories or other sectors—became the primary organizing principle of daily existence.

The Nazis' ultimate aim for the ghetto was twofold: exploitation and, eventually, annihilation. The Jewish leadership, however, was often unaware of the full extent of the Germans' plans. They did not realize, for much of the period, that their role as collaborators was pushing the Jews of the ghetto closer to extermination. Death became a constant presence within the ghetto, not only due to the brutal conditions of starvation, disease, and overcrowding, but also because of the deportations that decimated the population. People lived in an environment where uncertainty was pervasive, their futures obscured by the isolation of the ghetto and the German propaganda that sought to disguise the true fate awaiting them.

These testimonies, preserved by Boder, allow us to comprehend how the Jewish survivors navigated these horrific circumstances. They provide a nuanced understanding of how the ghetto inhabitants dealt with an unpredictable, brutal reality, where each decision could mean life or death. Through these voices, we gain a richer understanding of the psychological, social, and emotional responses to the constant presence of death and destruction that characterized life in the Łódź Ghetto.

References

- Adelman Alan, Lapedes, Robert (eds.). *Łódź Ghetto. Inside a Community under Siege*. New York: 1989.
- Boder David. *I Did not Interview the Dead*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949 (German translation: Julia Faisst, Alan Rosen & Werner Sollors, editors, *Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011).
- Boder David Paolo (1954). The impact of catastrophe: I. Assessment and evaluation. In «The Journal of Psychology», 38 (1), 3–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1954.9713072>
- Dobroszycki Lucjan. *Łódź Ghetto Chronicle*. New Haven: 1984.
- Friedman Philip. *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*. (Ada June Friedmaned). New York: 1980.
- Friedman Jonathan. Togetherness and Isolation: Holocaust Survivor Memories of Intimacy and Sexuality in the Ghettos. In «The Oral History Review» 28 (2001), 1: 1–16.
- Gringauz Samuel. The Ghetto as an Experiment of Jewish Social Organization (Three Years of Kovno Ghetto), in «Jewish Social Studies» 11 (1949) 1: 3-20.
- Jockush Laura. *Collect and Recall! Collect! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*. New York: 2012.
- Kuperstein Isaiah. Rumors: a Socio-Historical Phenomenon in the Ghetto of Łódź. In «The Polish Review» 18 (1973), 4: 63–83.
- Levi Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. London: 1988 (original edition: *I sommersi e i salvati*. Turin: Einaudi, 1986).
- Meghnagi David. *Ricomporre l'infranto. L'esperienza dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah*. Venezia: Marsilio, 2005.
- Niewyk David. *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival*. Chapel Hill: 1998.
- Shapiro Robert Moses. 2010. Rumkowski, Khayim Mordkhe. In «YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe», https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Rumkowski_Khayim_Mordkhe (accessed April 17, 2024).
- Trunk Isaiah. *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation*. New York: 1972.
- Trunk Isaiah. Note: Why Was There No Armed Resistance against the Nazis in the Łódź Ghetto? In «Jewish Social Studies». 43 (1981), 3/4: 329–34.
- Trunk Isaiah. *Łódź Ghetto: A History*. Bloomington: 2006.
- Tushnet Leonard. Health Conditions in the Ghetto of Łódź. In «Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences», 18 (1963), 1: 64–73.

Websites

<https://yivoencyclopedia.org/>
https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/catalog?f%5Bcollection_id_is%5D%5B%5D=231&search_field=advanced&search_type=simple&title_text=&type_of_search%5B%5D=simple
www.lodz-ghetto.com/home.html,0