

Chaim Rumkowski and the Deportation of Children from the Lodz Ghetto (1942)

Abstract

Chaim Rumkowski (1877–1944) was a Polish Jew, businessman, and leading member of the Jewish Council [Judenrat] in the Lodz Ghetto in German-occupied Poland. As the *de facto* leader of the ghetto, Rumkowski believed that the way to survive the Nazi occupation was to make the ghetto's Jewish population a vital component of Nazi wartime production. The first excerpt below, a report of his address to the Judenrat from the ghetto's chronicles, reflects this belief as he discusses his attempts to employ Jews within the borders of their community, and beyond. However, it is Rumkowski's decision to aid the Nazis' call for the deportation of 20,000 children and elderly persons that garnered the most attention in his writings. Most famous is his speech "Give Me Your Children," in which he announced his compliance with the deportation directive. In these excerpts, the aftermath of that decision is clear. He tries to justify the heart-wrenching and morally problematic decision that he made, writing that it was better for the ghetto's leaders to do it, rather than to watch the Germans carry out the order on their own free will. Rumkowski's morally difficult decisions in Lodz were made by countless other Jewish leaders across the ghetto system in Eastern Europe. Rumkowski and his wife were among those rounded up for the final deportation to Auschwitz from Lodz in 1944. He was beaten to death in August 1944 by the *Sonderkommando* in retribution for the decisions he made as leader of the ghetto.

Source

I. Rumkowski's Address to the Judenrat (February 1, 1941)

Chronicle No. 22

[...] Most of the propertied class left before the ghetto was closed. Those who remained were: the middle class, the poor, and the workers, who are to a large extent the element known as "the people from Baluti." This element in particular causes great difficulties for the Community authorities, because it is ill-disciplined and tends to create chaos in the life of the ghetto. It forms a majority percentage of the criminal population in the ghetto.

I have made it my aim to regulate life in the ghetto at all costs. This aim can be achieved, first of all, by employment for all. Therefore, my main slogan has been to give work *to the greatest possible number of people*. It was not a simple matter to set up the workshops. Great difficulty was caused by the fact that there were scarcely any Jewish factories within the area of the ghetto. Despite that I succeeded in establishing a series of work-places, factories, carpentry workshops, a leather tannery, tailoring workshops, shoe-making workshops, establishments for the production of the most varied goods... My workshops are now already employing up to 10,000 workers. About 1,000 unskilled laborers are employed on public projects. About 1,600 persons have already been sent to work outside the ghetto; they use part of their wages to support the families who have remained here and whom I pay a regular weekly wage....

Source of English translation: Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalio, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: selected sources on the destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, no. 109, p. 237. Used with permission of the University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, from *Documents on the Holocaust*, Yitzhak Arad, Israel

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Source of original text: D. Dabrowska and L. Dobroszycki, eds., *Kronika getta lodzkiego* ("Lodz Ghetto Chronicle"), I, Lodz, 1965, p. 48.

II. Rumkowski's Address at the Time of the Deportation of the Children from the Ghetto (September 4, 1942)

[...] The ghetto has been struck a hard blow. They demand what is most dear to it – children and old people. I was not privileged to have a child of my own and therefore devoted my best years to children. I lived and breathed together with children. I never imagined that my own hands would be forced to make this sacrifice on the altar. In my old age I am forced to stretch out my hands and to beg: "Brothers and sisters, give them to me!—Fathers and mothers, give me your children..." (Bitter weeping shakes the assembled public)... Yesterday, in the course of the day, I was given the order to send away more than 20,000 Jews from the ghetto, and if I did not — "we will do it ourselves." The question arose: "Should we have accepted this and carried

it out ourselves, or left it to others?" But as we were guided not by the thought: "how many will be lost?" but "how many can be saved?" we arrived at the conclusion — those closest to me at work, that is, and myself – that however difficult it was going to be, we must take upon ourselves the carrying out of this decree. I must carry out this difficult and bloody operation, I must cut off limbs in order to save the body! I must take away children, and if I do not, others too will be taken. God forbid... (terrible wailing).

I cannot give you comfort today. Nor did I come to calm you today, but to reveal all your pain and all your sorrow. I have come like a robber, to take from you what is dearest to your heart. I tried everything I knew to get the bitter sentence cancelled. When it could not be cancelled, I tried to lessen the sentence. Only yesterday I ordered the registration of nine-year-old children. I wanted to save at least one year — children from nine to ten. But they would not yield. I succeeded in one thing — to save the children over ten. Let that be our consolation in our great sorrow.

There are many people in this ghetto who suffer from tuberculosis, whose days or perhaps weeks are numbered. I do not know, perhaps this is a satanic plan, and perhaps not, but I cannot stop myself from proposing it: "Give me these sick people, and perhaps it will be possible to save the healthy in their place." I know how precious each one of the sick is in his home, and particularly among Jews. But at a time of such decrees one must weigh up and measure who should be saved, who can be saved and who may be saved.

Common sense requires us to know that those must be saved who can be saved and who have a chance of being saved and not those whom there is no chance to save in any case...

Source of English translation: Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot, eds., [Documents on the Holocaust: selected sources on the destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union](#). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, pp. 283–84. Used with permission of the University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, from *Documents on the Holocaust*, Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot, 8th edition, 1999; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

Source of original text: Trunk, *Lodzsher Geto* ("Lodz Ghetto"). New York, 1962, pp. 311–12.

III. Oskar Singer's Notes Following the Deportation of the Children

Lodz Ghetto

September 16, 1942

On September 5 the situation became clearer, and the frightening whispers of the past days became terrifying fact. The evacuation of children and old people took on the shape of reality. A small piece of paper on the wall in a busy part of the city announced an address by the President in an urgent matter. A huge crowd in Fire Brigade Square. The "Jewish Elder" will reveal the truth in the rumors. For it concerns the young for whom he has great love, and the aged, for whom he has much respect. "It cannot be that they will tear the babes from their mothers' breasts, and drag old fathers and old mothers to some unknown place. The German is without mercy, he wages a terrible war, but he will not go as far as that in cruelty." Everybody has faith in the President and hopes for words of comfort from him.

The representative of the ghetto is speaking. His voice fails him, the words stick in his throat. His personal appearance also mirrors the tragedy. One thing was understood by everybody: 20,000 persons must leave the ghetto, children under 10 and old people over 65. [...]

Everybody is convinced that the Jews who are deported are taken to destruction. [...] People ran here and there, crazed by the desire to hide the beloved victims. But nobody knew who would direct the *Aktion*: the Jewish Police, the Gestapo in the ghetto, or a mobile unit of the SS. The President, in coordination with the German authorities (Biebow) decided in his area of responsibility to carry out the deportation (with his own forces). It was the Jewish Police that had to tear the children from the mothers, to take the parents from their children. [...] It was to be expected that parents and relatives would try in this situation to make changes and corrections in registered ages. Errors and inaccuracies that had not been corrected up to now did exist. Something that gives you the right to live today may well decide your fate tomorrow. There

was a tendency to raise the age of the children, because a child from the age of 10 up could go to work and so be entitled to a portion of soup. Other parents lowered the age, because a younger child had a prospect of getting milk. Yesterday the milk and the soup were the most important things, today there is literally a question of staying alive. The age of the old people also moved up and down for various reasons.

An unprecedented migration began to the Registration Office. The officials tried to manage the situation. They worked without stopping, day and night. The pressure of the people at the office windows increased all the time. The applicants yelled, wept and went wild. Every second could bring the death sentence, and hours passed in the struggle to restrain their passion... On Saturday the Gestapo already began on the operation [deportation], without paying any attention to the feverish work of registration that had been going on at No. 4 Church Square. Everyone had supposed that the Order Police [Jewish Police] would not stand the test. It could not itself carry out the work of the hangmen....

The little ones who were loaded on the cart behaved quietly, in submission, or yelling, according to their ages. The children of the ghetto, boys and girls less than 10 years old, are already mature and familiar with poverty and suffering. The young look around them with wide-open eyes and do not know what to do. They are on a cart for the first time in their lives, a cart that will be pulled by a real horse, a proper horse. They are looking forward to a gay ride. More than one of the little ones jumps for joy on the floor of the wagon as long as there is enough space. And at the same time his mother has almost gone out of her mind, twisting about on the ground and tearing the hair from her head in despair. It is difficult to overcome several thousand mothers. It is difficult to persuade them to give their children up willingly to death, as a sacrifice. It is difficult to take out the old people who hide in the smallest and most hidden corners.

All this was to be expected. The President imposed a general curfew which came into force at 5 o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Anyone who broke it was threatened with deportation.

Source of English translation: Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: selected sources on the destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, pp. 284–86. Used with permission of the University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, from *Documents on the Holocaust*, Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot, 8th edition, 1999; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

Source of original text: *Dokumenty i materialy, II, Akcje i wysiedlenia* (“Documents and Records, II, Aktionen and Deportations”). Warsaw, 1946, pp. 243–46.

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