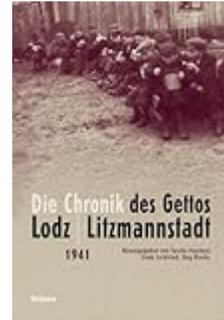


**Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried, Jörg Riecke, eds.** *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz / Litzmannstadt*. 5 volumes. In cooperation with Julian Baranowski, Joanna Podolska, Krystyna Radziszewska, and Jacek Walicki. With the assistance of Imke Janssen-Mignon, Andrea Löw, Joanna Ratusinska, Elisabeth Turvold and Ewa Wiatr. *Lodz Getto-Chronik*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007. 3053 pp. EUR 128.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89244-834-1.



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## Chronicle of a Death Observed

Between January 12, 1941 and July 30, 1944, a group of roughly fifteen journalists and writers employed by the archive of the Łódź ghetto worked together on a ghetto chronicle. They covered the main events that occurred in the ghetto and recorded what kept the population busy, the actions planned by the Germans, and how the inmates made sense of what was happening. In many respects their account resembles a newspaper, covering the events of the day, but, like a chronicle, it also bears witness on a larger historical scale. Remarkably, the ghetto chronicle never had a readership among its contemporaries. Indeed, hardly anyone in the ghetto was aware of its existence. Within the wider context of the Holocaust, the Łódź chronicle was a unique enterprise: while numerous diaries were kept—some diarists even using their journals as a chronicle (Herman Kruk and Victor Klemperer, to name two well-known examples)—and highly informative official ghetto and camp announcements and reports survive, such a collective chronicle of a ghetto stands alone (even compared with the Ringelblum archive in Warsaw, perhaps

its closest equivalent). Now, sixty-five years after its last entry, the entire text of the Łódź ghetto chronicle is finally accessible to the public in a critical edition of no less than five volumes and 3,052 pages.

The gigantic task of editing this long and complicated text was taken up by the Arbeitsstelle Holocaustliteratur at the University of Gießen, which employed mostly Germanists rather than historians. The Łódź ghetto was long something of a blind spot on the map of Holocaust studies. It was a doubly conspicuous lacuna; not only was Łódź central in the decision-making process of the “Final Solution” of 1941-42, it was the second largest ghetto in eastern Europe. After May 1943 and the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, it was the largest. During the last three years, something of a surge of scholarship on Łódź has been evident. First came Michael Alberti’s account of the machinery of Nazi persecution in the Warthegau,[1] followed by Andrea Lämmel’s dense portrayal of the inmates’ society and the English translation of Isaiah Trunk’s classic work, originally pub-

lished in 1962 in Yiddish.[2] Recently, two microstudies have appeared; Gordon Horwitz's on the city, and Peter Klein's excellent analysis of the Nazi ghetto administration.[3] So, in a brief period, a fairly complete set of studies that explains both the external and internal workings of the ghetto has become available, thanks above all to the painstaking tradition of German scholarship. Among these publications, the ghetto chronicle holds a distinct position as a primary source, one recorded in the first instance to capture its history from within. For anyone seeking to write on the history of the Łódź ghetto, the chronicle is indispensable, and it has been extensively exploited by the authors of the recent works (though Horwitz worked with the heavily abridged English-language edition).

Łódź, established in April 1940, was the very first of the Nazi ghettos in eastern Europe, and with the exception of Theresienstadt, it existed the longest. It was set up in the newly annexed area of the Warthegau, an area subject to thoroughgoing Germanization. Łódź itself, now renamed Litzmannstadt, was to be a German city. The ghetto was established in the run-down districts of Baluty and Marysin, without sewage or running water. Its first inhabitants were the Jewish inhabitants of Łódź. Later, Jews from surrounding areas were deported there, too. In October 1941, the ghetto received 20,000 new arrivals, "western Jews" from Prague, Vienna, Luxemburg, and several German cities who populated the first wave of mass deportations from central and western Europe. Altogether, some 200,000 people lived in Łódź ghetto at some point. About 45,000 died there of malnutrition or disease. Almost all the other inmates were shipped to annihilation centers in 1942, or during a brief final phase of the ghetto in summer 1944. The victims were deported to the nearby extermination camp of Chełmno, which consumed some 77,000 victims. In August 1944, transports took some 72,000 deportees to Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is estimated that between 5,000 and 7,000 people survived altogether, 900 of them hidden in the deserted ghetto district.

The Łódź chronicle adds a human dimension to these numbers and dates. It demonstrates what happened in those three-and-a-half years during which it was written. It tracks the food situation, deaths, births, marriages, work assignments and production, the mood of the people, and their communication and conflicts. Indeed, it is the most important source we have about the ghetto, its administration, and people, and what they knew about the intentions of the Nazis outside. For writing an integrative history of the Holocaust, victim ac-

counts of this kind provide an invaluable complement to perpetrators' records. The chroniclers observe the actions and concerns of the "little people" and note their grouping, dynamics, and contradictions. The chroniclers never forget that the people observed are individuals, however miserable they may have become; the texts follow individuals' fates with respect and curiosity. This result is all the more striking as the chroniclers themselves were subject to the whole process and yet still able to maintain something like a professional distance. More than any abstract historiographical plea, the chronicle demonstrates the relevance of the victims' experience, agency, and everyday life.

The project that produced this remarkable text was an enterprise of the head of the Jewish Council, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. The chronicle soberly describes how Rumkowski built up and organized his ghetto, along with his omnipresence and skill as a leader; obviously, the chroniclers were somewhat influenced in their assessment by his position of authority over them. He established the archive, within which a group of co-workers had the task of writing the chronicle. In order to avoid attracting the Germans' attention, almost no one in the ghetto knew about the undertaking. Thus, the heroic task of maintaining the chronicle fell largely on the small group of chroniclers themselves. In the first year and a half of its composition, Polish Jews fulfilled the charge. They were joined in autumn 1942 by a group of Prague deportees, most importantly Oskar Singer and Oskar Rosenfeld, both experienced journalists. The language of the work is thus initially Polish and later changes into German (the nature of the text's language is discussed in vol. 5, pp. 218-269). The chroniclers not only wrote, but also set out to collect information, an operation they had to carry out discreetly so as not to reveal the existence of the record they were creating.

The genre of the work is halfway between diary and newspaper. Like a diary, it lacks a narrative or a thesis. Yet, like a newspaper, it was written for a larger public. This public, however, was envisioned as a free, postwar world that was to find out about the life of the Łódź Jews. The chronicle sought to document the life of the Łódź Jews, to preserve their memory, and to catch the last moments of their lives on the dual assumption that the war would end and that the postwar world would be interested in their fates. The postwar history of the work is a fascinating story of its own, and the editors wisely tell it in one of the excellent accompanying essays in the supplementary volume. Ironically, the postwar world was keenly interested, but due to the Cold War, the texts be-

came dispersed between Poland, New York, and Israel. A Polish edition was destroyed in 1968 after its first two volumes appeared. The English edition was heavily abridged and flattened out most of the text's intriguing qualities. The Hebrew edition, too, is abridged. Thus it is only more than sixty years after the end of the war that the work appears here in its entirety. The editors arduously collected and compared the various existing versions of the text, marking the significant differences in footnotes that are divided according to calendar months at the end of each respective volume.

The editors, as scholars of German literature and language, opted for a philological edition. Jürgen Riecke and Sascha Feuchert point out the richness of the literary and linguistic dimension of the texts in their respective essays. As the Prague team took over, the *Ä³dÄ°* ghetto chronicle started featuring newspaper-style columns, with titles such as "Kleiner Gettospiegel," "Man hÄ¶rt, man spricht...", and "Getto-Humor," reporting—in established Viennese and Prague German liberal newspaper style—on people who were growing vegetables on the rooftop of the courtyard toilet or bartering food to escape deportation. The style is that of prewar journalism. What is novel is the topic of the threatening, unknown environment of a dirty ghetto in which death was a daily presence. Some scholars, most notably Lawrence Langer, have described the Holocaust as unspeakable for the victims, an experience so horrible it cannot be told in words, whose narrators fragment their narratives beyond recognition.[4] The ghetto chronicle, together with the journalists' private texts, is ample evidence that the Holocaust could be captured quite well in traditional genres, especially when experienced, able writers described the grisly new environment.

The editorial notes primarily address the historical context and the linguistic dimension, pointing out the linguistic quirks and geographical origin of many utterances, while carefully consulting copious additional sources in German, Polish, Czech, Yiddish, and English. The historical footnotes explain the events and put them into context. The editors have done an incredible job of locating many forgotten individuals and clarifying long-forgotten seemingly minor facts. For the more significant historical events, such as the huge deportations (*Sperre*) of September 1942, the comments consistently offer parallel quotes from other sources, diaries, or post-war testimonies, often several pages long. This approach is somewhat clumsy, as it leaves the reader to read through lengthy pages of parallel comments, which is time-consuming, not always relevant, and often con-

fusing. Clearly, the editors aimed to comment on and interpret the form of the text (the language and style) rather than the content (the events and interpretation of the writer). A certain degree of contextualization and commenting interpretation on both form and the content is, however, always the editor's task; the reader can differentiate between the source and the comment.

The *Getto-Chronik* is a breathtaking text, and thanks to the enormous work of its editors, it is now accessible to the public. It would be desirable for the publisher to prepare a digital edition on a CD to enable text-search: unfortunately, the volumes do not have a topic index, probably because it simply would have been too long. Reading the chronicle, one feels drawn into a bleak microcosm of compulsion and constraint, in which a community of inmates continues hoping, fighting, thinking, and planning until the very end. Although the reader knows perfectly well what happened to the deported, the chroniclers and their fellow prisoners speculate and slowly piece together what must have happened after they see their recently departed relatives' bloody clothes. In effect, the chronicle offers an account of 3,052 pages, narrated in a clear and graphic language, of suffering, alienation, starvation, and death. The chronicle thus makes for grim reading, but it conveys the experience of the *Ä³dÄ°* ghetto perhaps better than any other source. As well as being an invaluable tool for historians, it serves as a powerful memorial to the 200,000 people who lived and died there.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Alberti, *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden im Reichsgau Wartheland 1939-1945* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

[2]. LÄ¶w, a historian, was a part of the edition team. See Andrea LÄ¶w, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (GÄ¶ttingen: Wallstein, 2006); and Isaiah Trunk, *Lodz Ghetto: A History*, translated by Robert Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

[3]. Gordon Horwitz, *Ghettostadt: Ä³dÄ° and the Making of a Nazi City* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); and Peter Klein, *Die "Gettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt" 1940-1944: Eine Dienststelle im Spannungsfeld von KommunalbÄ¶rokratie und staatlicher Verfolgungspolitik* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2009).

[4]. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

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