“CAST ME NOT OFF IN MY TIME OF OLD AGE…”: THE AGED AND AGING IN
THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO, 1939-1944

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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December 2013
“CAST ME NOT OFF IN MY TIME OF OLD AGE…”: THE AGED AND AGING IN
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This dissertation is an exploration of the aged and aging in the Łódź ghetto from 1939 to 1944. The first two years of German occupation and Jewish subjugation from May 1940 to September 1942 provide the chronological focus for my analysis of the experiences of older Jews in the Łódź ghetto. Aged Jews in the ghetto struggled for their own survival and contributed to the wellbeing of the larger community. Constant negotiations between the needs of older Jews and various communal objectives generated moments of solidarity and revealed devastating tensions within the community. The escalating policies of German authorities during the first years of the ghetto period created an environment in which possibilities of survival among the elderly dwindled. Negotiations for survival in the contexts of work, family, and communal life reveal the degradation of fundamental social structures.

Through the lens of aging, both actual and metaphorical, this dissertation reveals connections between the fate of the aged in the ghetto and the community as a whole. In early September 1942 German authorities led a violent assault on the Jewish community
in the Łódź ghetto that targeted Jews under the age of ten and over the age of sixty-five for murder. During the week of 5 September 16,500 Jews were torn from community institutions and family dwellings, contained in collections points, and loaded on trains bound for the death camp at Chelmno. No family was left untouched, and all were engulfed by grief over the death of loved ones. The community’s oldest generation was killed overnight. The collection of individuals that remained alive in the Łódź ghetto in the wake of this mass murder experienced the phenomenon of rapid collective aging. From 1939 through 1942, German policies ensured the deaths of tens of thousands of elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto and the hallmarks of a vibrant, cohesive Jewish community died.
For my family.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the History Department and the Graduate School at the University of Notre Dame, the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Center for Jewish History, the Holocaust Educational Foundation, and the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., for generous financial and scholarly support of my work.

I am particularly grateful to the members of my dissertation committee. Without their help this endeavor would not have been possible. I would like to thank Semion Lyandres for his guidance from the very beginning of my graduate career. It was in his seminar many years ago that I learned the ins and outs of historiography. He helped me find my way through the tangled web of Soviet and Russian histories and shared my appreciation for North Carolina. For his wisdom and his ceaseless support, I am forever thankful. Asher Kaufman showed interest in the project from the time I proposed it. I am grateful for his quiet enthusiasm and encouragement. Paul Jaskot very graciously offered to be a reader on the committee after I was fortunate enough to participate in the Holocaust Educational Foundation’s Summer Institute program in 2010. Paul’s seminar at the Summer Institute and his work on the USHMM’s “Geographies of Holocaust” project have been an inspiration. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Michael and Betty Signer. Michael took me under his wing during my first semester. His kindness and
enthusiasm ensured my scholarly success. Michael and Betty provided opportunities to engage in important Christian-Jewish dialogue that informed my work in ways I could not have imagined at the time. Their generosity and support will never be forgotten.

Doris Bergen is the reason I pursued a degree at the University of Notre Dame. Doris is the reason that this project is complete and the reason that I have had any measure of success as a nascent scholar. Her unending generosity, gentle encouragement, astute analytical mind, and invigorating spirit have shaped my scholarly pursuits and challenged me to be a better student, teacher, colleague, and friend. Everyone should be so lucky as to have a person like Doris in their lives.

I would like to thank all of the people that pulled together, especially at the end, to see this project to completion. I owe my family, in particular, a large debt of gratitude. Thank you does not suffice. From an early age, the Covingtons nurtured without reservation my scholarly endeavors and took every measure available to them to ensure my success. Charles was an unwavering source of support from our early days of graduate school, through the ups and downs of completing the project, and in the final stages of completion. Most of all I would like to thank Anna, Charlie, and Tessa. This project existed before they came into my life, but it would not have been completed without the inspiration they provide daily.
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas, 1951
INTRODUCTION:
INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE AGING IN THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

9 Cast me not off in the time of old age:
   When my strength faileth, forsake me not.
10 For mine enemies speak concerning me:
    And they that watch for my soul take
counsel together,
11 Saying: “God hath forsaken him;
    For there is none to deliver.”
12 O God, be not far from me;
    O my God, make haste to help me.
13 Let them be ashamed and consumed that
    Are adversaries to my soul;
    let them be covered with reproach and
    confusion that seek my hurt.
14 But as for me, I will hope continually,
    And will praise Thee yet more and more.

Psalms 71: 9-14

In December 1940, sixty-eight year-old Yakov David Zaltsberg\(^2\) penned a petition
to Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the Eldest of the Jews in the Łódź Ghetto [Älteste der

\(^1\) Psalms 71: 9-14 [Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh, 1917].

\(^2\) Coexistence of multiple languages and absence of standardized language conventions
contributed to inconsistency in spelling. Surviving documents from the Łódź ghetto, in particular the
petitions examined here, were rife with multiple spellings of the same name using a combination of
German, Yiddish, and Polish conventions. Variations confound even the most diligent researcher. I have
done my best to develop and maintain a system for consistency. In the case of petitions written and signed
in Yiddish I have used the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research’s guidelines for transliteration, unless a
more common rendering exists. In cases of multiple spellings of a single name, I relied on the signature at
Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt], requesting admission to a community-run home for the aged. Zaltsberg began the letter with the following plea: “‘Cast me not off in my time of old age.’” The imperative form of this Jewish prayer served a dual purpose. First, the scriptural reference revealed an intrinsic connection between the elderly author and his intended recipient. Both men belonged to the Jewish community of Łódź. As members of one communal body, they were bound by a past steeped in religious tradition and common cultural heritage and brought together under the present violent circumstances by German oppressors. Second, by invoking Psalms 71:9 Zaltsberg emphasized the obligations of the collective to its individual members. The aging man, displaced from familiar networks of support, reasserted his position as a member of the Jewish community and, in accordance with the dictates of communal existence, demanded support from the leadership.

This dissertation examines the Łódź Ghetto through the lens of aging, both actual and metaphorical, to reveal connections between the fate of the aged in the ghetto and the community as a whole. Zaltsberg’s petition of December 1940 and his subsequent appeal in March 1941 were emblematic of the survival strategies of older Jews in the ghetto, shaped by the particular plight of the aged and the universal hardships experienced by all the close of each letter. When the signature was either illegible or that of a third party, I adopted the spelling of the name as it appeared first in the petition.

3 In December 1940 there was one home for the aged in the Łódź ghetto, which had been transferred from its original location to Dworska 74 within the ghetto borders in April 1940.

4 Yakov David Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, Petition, 10 December 1940. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [hereafter USHMM], Przełożony Starszeństwa Żydow w Getcie Łódzkim (Łódź Ghetto Jewish Council), 1939-1944, RG-15.083M, File 267: Applications for Placement in Old Age Homes, 1940-1942, Reel 90, 692-693. (Emphasis in the original.)
ghetto inhabitants.\textsuperscript{5} The successes and failures of these strategies reflected the central tension between individual and collective responses to persecution and death in the Łódź ghetto. Zaltsberg described his personal hardships as well as the extreme stresses endured by families in the ghetto, highlighting the importance of human connections in a time of increasing isolation.

Zaltsberg’s letters, and the reference to Psalms 71:9 in particular, connected the survival of the elderly to the survival of the community. The life of the community depended on its elderly members just as aged Jews owed their own survival to community support. From May 1940 through September 1942, German-initiated policies effectively narrowed the options available to older men and women, culminating in the Shpere Aktion in which German authorities targeted ghetto inhabitants over 65 years old for murder. The progressive dissolution of communal support networks precluded the development of viable survival strategies for the elderly and transformed the entire ghetto community. Zaltsberg’s petitions foreshadowed this process of rapid collective aging, with “old age” defined as close proximity to death.

In fulfillment of the decree establishing a Jewish ghetto in Łódź on 8 February 1940, Yakov Zaltsberg and his wife were forced from their home and herded into an impoverished section of the city along with 164,000 other Jews. Zaltsberg’s wife succumbed to conditions within months of their arrival in the ghetto. The death of his wife left the aging man without the means to care for himself. The widower found refuge with a daughter and her family in their flat at Goplańska 28. Family offered first recourse

\textsuperscript{5} Yakov David Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, Petition, 27 March 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 626.
to older Jews, like Zaltsberg, who could no longer support themselves. Zaltsberg had few words to spare for his daughter in his appeals for help from the community, leaving the nature of the father-daughter relationship open for interpretation and speculation. The desire to believe in the strength of family unity in times of extreme peril would have us imagine an aging father turning to his progeny for support and the loving embrace of a daughter welcoming her father into her home. Although such scenarios did occur as the Jews of Łódź were crowded into the ghetto, the extreme pressures of hunger, disease, and death that resulted from German policies dissolved even the strongest family bonds.

Records of the Jewish Council’s population registry revealed a more complicated picture of the family Zaltsberg encountered upon moving into his daughter’s dwelling. Zaltsberg shared dwelling number 5 at Goplańska 28 with 38-year-old Marja Hinda Sztal (née Zaltsberg), 37-year-old Chil Sztal, and two children, Chaja Malka (12) and Sara (4). The living situation was seemingly straightforward. Yet Zaltsberg described his living conditions to Rumkowski in desperate terms. He found himself in a “terribly tragic

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6 The Łódź Ghetto Jewish Council maintained a population registry in February 1940 until the destruction of the ghetto in August 1944. The registry collected the names, birthdates, addresses, and occupations of Jews who resided in the ghetto during the period. Ghetto inhabitants were obliged to register information regarding address changes, deaths, and transports in and out of the ghetto. Entries in the original registry were organized according to street, building, and dwelling. After the war the surviving documents of the population registry were housed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. In 1967 the records were turned over to the State Archives in Łódź. Using photocopies obtained from the Polish State Archives, Yad Vashem worked with the Organization of the Łódź Former Residents in Israel to compile and edit the records for publication. The joint effort resulted in a five-volume compilation. An alphabetical list of residents constituted the first four volumes and entries deemed to be duplicates appeared in the fifth volume. See Yad Vashem, Łódź - Names: List of Ghetto Inhabitants, 1940-1944. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem in conjunction with the Organization of the Łódź Former Residents in Israel, 1994). More recently, Alexander Avraham, Director of the Hall of Names and the Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names at Yad Vashem, oversaw the creation of a searchable online database based on the registry. The database can be found here: http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/LodzGhetto.html.

7 Records of the population registry showed four other people living in flat number 5 at Goplańska 28. Marja [Marje] Hinda Sztal (b. 1902) was most likely the daughter Zaltsberg referred to in his letter. Also living at Goplańska 28 in flat number 5 were Chil Sztal (b. 1903), Chaja Malka Sztal (b. 1927), and Sara Sztal (b.1935).
situation.” The population registry gave some insight into Zaltsberg’s expressed concern. His new residence was not only occupied by his daughter’s immediate family but was also surrounded by his son-in-law’s family. Branches of the Sztal family occupied two additional apartments at Goplańska 28. Newly widowed, Zaltsberg was now living in close quarters with multiple generations of a family that was not his own. The elderly widower’s personal grief was no doubt intensified by his status as an outsider, cramped living quarters, and lack of food.

If Zaltsberg found any joy in his new situation, the discovery originated in the nurturing relationships he built with his grandchildren. The old man relished the opportunity to spend time with his daughter’s children. He wrote: “It delights me in every little way to be together with small children, my grandchildren.” For a time, these intergenerational connections provided Zaltsberg a kind of nourishment to counter the scarcity and hunger that plagued family life. For the family, taking in the aging father meant providing food for an additional person. Zaltsberg wrote that his daughter had “barely enough for the children to eat” and added, “I am, thank God, still in good physical health.” The cheerfulness of the latter statement was devastating in what it revealed about the difficult choices families made in the ghetto and the implications of those choices for older family members. Members of the nuclear family unit were first to

8 Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, 692.

9 Just next door to Zaltsberg and his daughter in flat number 4 were his daughter’s in-laws Ruchel Sztal (b. 1879) and Szja Majer Sztal (b.1873) along with Ester Malka Sztal (b. 1923). The family of Pinkus Sztal (b. 1907) occupied flat number 1, including Chaja Laja Sztal (b. 1908) and Jakub Sztal (b. 1937).

10 Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, 692.

11 Ibid.
receive food, a prize possession in the ghetto. By December 1940, Zaltsberg made the tough decision to forgo the intergenerational relationships that he so cherished in search of more viable options for survival.

In addition to the influence of family circumstances, both of Zaltsberg’s appeals for aid from the Jewish Council indicated an important network of support beyond the old man’s family. After living in Łódź for more than half a century, Zaltsberg had built a life and developed relationships that made him “well-known in the city.” As evidence of his connectedness to the community, he mentioned three prominent personalities. Zaltsberg submitted his petition at the behest of David Gertler, to whom he “was rather like an uncle.” The old man also offered as references two members of the Łódź Ghetto Rabbinate, Abraham Silman and Shmuel David Laski. As his neighbors, Zaltsberg insisted, the rabbis could attest to his suffering. Also residents of Goplańska 28, Rabbis

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12 David Gertler (b. 15 February 1911) was a notorious ghetto figure and a counterpoint to Rumkowski’s authority. Gertler was an agent of the Gestapo and commander of the infamous Sonderabteilung, an independent unit of the Jewish police established in June 1940. In this capacity Gertler monitored political activity in the ghetto and confiscated Jewish wealth and property at the behest of German and Jewish authorities. After September 1942, Gertler effectively replaced Rumkowski as ruler of the ghetto. Although Rumkowski maintained titular authority, Gertler benefited from new support from Hans Biebow and the German Ghettoverwaltung. Gertler’s influence reached its pinnacle beginning in November 1942, when he assumed control over the distribution of food rations in the ghetto.

13 Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, 692.

14 Abraham Silman (b. 25 October 1904) and Shmuel David Laski (b. 7 April/November 1897) occupied two positions on the fifteen-member Rabbinical Council in the Łódź ghetto. Silman registered his ghetto residence as Goplańska 28, number 2, the same building as Zaltsberg and his family. Records of the population registry listed a Dawid Laski living at Dolna 5 and Goplańska 28, number 3-4. The differing addresses listed in these entries suggested that the Rabbi moved residence at some point during the ghetto existence. Elderly petitioners corroborated the addresses listed. For example, Zaltsberg described Laski as a “neighbor” at Goplańska 28. Bina Silberspitz living at Dolna 32 also listed Rabbi Laski as a neighbor. See Bina Silberspitz, Petition, 12 September 1941, USHMM RG-5.083M, File 267, Reel 90, p. 387. It should also be noted that Dolna and Goplańska Streets ran parallel to each other, separated by only about 100 meters. Buildings on either side of the street shared courtyards and residents of both streets were likely to interact. For more on Silman and Laski as well as the activities of the Rabbinical Council in the ghetto, see Esther E. Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), 167, 345.
Silman and Laski would have been privy to interactions of all kinds between the elderly Zaltsberg and the Sztal family.

Self-reliance, familial support, and communal relationships ensured that up to December 1940 Zaltsberg had never sought official community support nor ever burdened anyone, “God forbid.” German policies of isolation and deprivation resulted in the degradation of the family and the collapse of supportive social networks that provided aid to older Jews. The failure of traditional means of survival forced Zaltsberg and hundreds of other elderly ghetto inhabitants to seek help from the community leadership.

Appeals for admission to the community’s old age home, and in particular Zaltsberg’s invocation of Psalms 71:9, reflected the competing impulses of survival extant in the aged and alluded to their distinctive plight in the ghetto. On the one hand, aging men and women asserted their independence and took measures to maintain self-sufficiency. At the same time, the material and emotional support of communal networks—from the intimate, interpersonal relationships of family and friends to casual connections affiliated with larger social organizations—proved essential to alleviating the destructive effects of hunger, disease, and death on the elderly population. Zaltsberg sought communal assistance when he could not support himself and his family situation was no longer tenable. The aging man appealed to Rumkowski, the leader of the ghetto community, with a prayer of petition, an allusion to the religious traditions, cultural heritage, and mutual obligations that bound the Jewish community.

Communal responses to German policies in the Łódź ghetto mirrored the competing existential impulses of the aged population and indicated a metaphorical process of collective aging. Through September 1942, German-initiated policies that
aimed to exploit, denigrate, and annihilate the Jews of Łódź had contradictory results. In
the context of “survival through work,” individualist impulses found new expression in
the communal project for self-sufficiency. Ghettoization brought some families closer
together. For others, crowding and hunger caused atomization of the family and isolated
older men and women.

When German authorities permitted it, Jewish mutual aid integrated people on the
fringe of society, the aged in particular, into the communal fabric. Beginning in 1942,
however, German authorities co-opted the Jewish institutions and organizations in the
ghetto to implement policies intend to destroy the community. Avenues of survival for
the elderly became fewer and fewer as communal networks dissolved, a process that
brought both older ghetto inhabitants and the Łódź ghetto community closer to death.
Psalm 71:9 intimated the existential problem of the Jewish community in the Łódź
Ghetto.

The Łódź Ghetto: A Brief History

The German occupation of Łódź from 8 September 1939 until 19 January 1945,
when the city was liberated by the advancing Soviet Army, comprised four distinct
periods: (1) the months immediately following the German invasion through the isolation
and ghettoization of the Jewish population in spring 1940; (2) the initial ghetto period
from May 1940 through the beginning of German preparations for the “Final Solution” in
autumn 1941; (3) the violent assault on the ghetto that took place over the course of 1942
and resulted in the removal and murder of 70,000 ghetto inhabitants; and (4) the years
following the devastating Aktionen of 1942, culminating in the destruction of the Łódź
ghetto in August 1944. When the Wehrmacht captured Łódź in September 1939,
occupation forces encountered an ethnically and culturally diverse population. In 1939 the second largest city in Poland was home to 672,000 people of whom 233,000 were Jews. From the beginning, Łódź played a central role in ideological and practical debates over Nazi policy objectives at all levels of the German hierarchy.\textsuperscript{15}

Arthur Greiser, Reichsstatthalter and Nazi Party Gauleiter of the Wartheland region as of 26 October 1939, successfully lobbied for the annexation of Łódź to the German Reich, becoming the most influential German official in determining the fate of the Jews in Łódź.\textsuperscript{16} Łódź officially became part of the Reich on 8 November, and Greiser initiated a plan to transform Łódź into a flagship German city at the frontier of the German Reich, one that would be completely Judenfrei by October 1940.\textsuperscript{17} Greiser’s vision for Łódź intensified local anti-Jewish policies that began within days of the occupation.

Anti-Jewish policies at the local level, commanded by German civilian and police authorities, created an atmosphere of terror and fear among the Jewish population. German authorities appointed a Jewish Council [Judenrat or Beirat] as early as 12


\textsuperscript{16} Arthur Greiser remained Reich Governor in the Wartheland district until the end of the war. During his reign, Greiser was responsible for the murder of 98 percent of the Jews living in his district (more than 380,000 people). See Catherine Epstein, Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland (New York: Oxford University Press 2010).

\textsuperscript{17} The decree from Hitler assumed the western part of Poland (Wartheland) into the greater German Reich on 8 October 1939. The city of Łódź was not incorporated until a month later when Arthur Greiser interceded. After the annexation, in April 1940 the city was renamed Litzmannstadt after a German General from the First World War, Karl Litzmann. The streets of Litzmannstadt were likewise given German names. I have opted to use the Polish street names as designated prior to September 1939.
September to act as intermediary between the German occupiers and Jewish locals. In the first month of the occupation Jews were arrested, abused, and sent out of the city for forced labor. German officials publicly humiliated traditional Jewish men, often elderly, by shaving their beards and forcing them to perform demeaning activities. As a result many wealthy and elite Jews fled the city, among them the acting head of the Jewish Council, Leizer Pływacki. On 13 October 1939, Pływacki’s deputy Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski took over as the Eldest of the Jews. Rumkowski’s Council was responsible for carrying out German orders as well as managing and maintaining the needs of the Jewish community. Rumkowski’s first Council only survived three weeks.

After Łódź became Reich territory, German authorities launched a violent assault on the Jewish population in the city. On 11 November, German authorities arrested most of the thirty-one members of the Jewish Council and murdered twenty of them. During that same month Łódź District President Friedrich Übelhör ordered the Jews in his district to wear a yellow armband for identification and later a yellow Star of David. In mid-November German officials desecrated and burned the local synagogues, including Altshtot Synagogue at Wolborska 20 and the Great Synagogue at Spacerowa 2.18 During

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18 In 1939 there were six synagogues and many smaller prayer houses that served the Jewish community in Łódź. The Orthodox “Altshtot” or “Stara” synagogue built in 1809 was the oldest among them. Germans set fire to the building destroying the inside on the night of 14-15 November 1939. The Reform Synagogue, known as the “Great” synagogue or the “German Temple,” was built between 1883 and 1887 and was the largest physical structure in the city center. German officials burned the Reform synagogue to the ground during the night on 15-16 November 1939. Also destroyed during the mid-November pogrom were the Zionist “Ohel Jakov” synagogue (est. 1898) at Gdanska 18 and the “Erzas Izrael” Association synagogue (est. 1899), which primarily served the Litvak Jewish community. Only the Synagogue at Zachodnia 56 was spared. On a Tuesday earlier in the month German officials had ordered Jews to come to the synagogue for a prayer service. While filming the assembly in prayer, a member of the congregation committed a subtle act of defiance by beginning his reading of the Torah with the remark: “Today is Tuesday.” Because the Torah was not generally read in such a way on Tuesdays, knowledgeable viewers could recognize that the film was staged. The Vilner Shul on Zachodnia was eventually destroyed in 1940 when the Germans burned the inside. The only synagogue that survived was a small structure at
the month of November, the Jews of Łódź were systematically dispossessed and humiliated.

Early anti-Jewish policies coupled with forced deportation to the *Generalgouvernement* were part of Greiser’s plan to create a German city free of Jews. The resettlement of tens of thousands of ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*), brought from territories in Soviet control *Heim ins Reich* starting in autumn 1939, intensified the pressure on the Jewish population of Łódź.\(^\text{19}\) During this period, thousands of Jews were sent to German-occupied eastern Poland, under the administration of Reich Governor Hans Frank.

Only when Hans Frank objected to the influx of Jewish expellees into the territory under his control was Greiser forced to amend his plans for the Jews of Łódź. By December 1939, German anti-Jewish policies shifted from expulsion to isolation. Between December 1939 and May 1940, various German authorities in the city issued a series of five executive orders to quarantine the Jews of Łódź. In a secret decree from 10 December 1939, Governor of the Łódź District, Friedrich Übelhör, outlined plans for a separate Jewish residential area. On 8 February 1940 German Police Chief Johannes Schäfer issued a decree that officially established the ghetto and ordered Jews to move to the prescribed space located in the neighborhoods of Bałuty and Old Town, northeast of the city center.\(^\text{20}\) The Jewish ghetto was expanded to encompass the old Jewish cemetery

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\(^\text{20}\) For an English translation of the decree, see Adelson and Lapides, *Łódź Ghetto*, 31-32. The ordinance included eight directions intended to guide the massive population transfers necessary to
and an undeveloped parcel of land in Marysin in an ordinance of 8 April. The piecemeal nature of ghettoization reflected uncertainties within the German hierarchy as to the ultimate objectives of Nazi anti-Jewish policies. In 1940 German authorities considered the Łódź ghetto a transitional measure to isolate the Jews.

Jews began to move into the ghetto after the ordinance of 8 February in part to escape German attacks in the streets. However, Poles and ethnic Germans residing in apartments designated for the ghetto were reluctant to leave their homes, confounding the possibility of an easy population shift. German authorities eventually deemed the slow pace of transfer unsatisfactory. During the first week of March, German authorities terrorized the Jewish population by forcibly evicting those still living outside the confines of the ghetto and murdering transgressors who did not leave their homes at a pace acceptable to German officials. The night of 7-8 March became known as “Bloody Thursday” after German police and SS murdered hundreds of Jews on the street and in their homes. In the following weeks movement beyond the ghetto boundaries was increasingly regulated. On 1 May 1940 the ghetto was officially sealed and a fence erected as a physical barrier between the ghetto and the surrounding city. A final police ordinance on 7 May 1940 completed the process of isolation, cutting all communication and interaction between Jews in the ghetto and Christian Poles living outside the ghetto walls.

The second period of German occupation in Łódź followed the closure of the ghetto borders. The German Mayor of Łódź, Franz Schiffer, granted Rumkowski broad

concentrate all of the Jews of the city into a single space. The original decree was brief and anticipated the need for more detailed instructions in the coming months.
authority to manage the internal life of the ghetto. On the day the ghetto was sealed, Hans Biebow, a successful businessman and coffee importer, was appointed to head the German Ghetto Administration [Ghettoverwaltung]. In this capacity, Biebow was charged with managing the ghetto, overseeing the implementation of German policies via Rumkowski, and confiscating any remaining Jewish property. Rumkowski’s consolidation of power, maintenance of social welfare, and establishment of a productive labor force in the ghetto was wholly dependent on German approval, especially the support of Biebow.

The Jewish Council faced a population in crisis when the ghetto was sealed. In May 1940, the impoverished neighborhoods designated for the ghetto occupied 4.13 square kilometers in a northeastern section of Łódź. Available living quarters were crowded into 2.41 square kilometers. Approximately 160,000 Jews were crammed into 3,361 one- and two-storey buildings that housed 31,962 dwellings of one or two rooms. The vast majority (95 percent) of the dwellings had no hygienic facilities. Running water, sewage pipes, and bathrooms were a luxury that only 49 out of the total dwellings enjoyed. The population density was about seven times the average in prewar Łódź.

Upon arrival in the ghetto Jews faced the immediate concern of shelter. Some were taken in by family and friends who already resided within the ghetto boundaries. In the quest for shelter and to claim a space in the crowded ghetto, in some cases Jews

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forcibly claimed abandoned rooms or paid a hefty price to building landlords to acquire keys. Others fought with Polish occupants who refused to leave their dwellings despite German demands. Amidst the chaos, some ghetto dwellings housed ten to fifteen people. The Jewish Council erected large encampments in order to shelter homeless families. As families shifted and moved between dwellings the average number of people living in each ghetto dwelling settled at about three or four people per room.

To ensure the isolation of the Jews in the ghetto, the German *Schutzpolizei* \([Schupo]\) charged with guarding the perimeter followed strict orders to shoot anyone who approached the fence. During the ghetto’s existence *Schupo* guards murdered hundreds of Jews, creating an atmosphere of fear among the entire population. Biebow’s ghetto administration controlled food distribution, work details, and expropriation of Jewish property. The *Kriminalpolizei* \([Kripo]\) and *Geheimstaatspolizei* \([Gestapo]\) acted as the security wing of the German occupation authority. In theory, the *Kripo* was responsible for prosecuting Jewish crimes against Germans. In reality, this institution organized the plunder of Jewish resources. *Gestapo* authorities oversaw political life in the ghetto and carried out “actions” in the ghetto as part of the “Final Solution.”\(^\text{23}\)

For the first two years of the ghetto’s existence, Biebow granted Rumkowski and the Jewish Council a relative amount of freedom to organize and manage internal life in the ghetto using the scarce resources afforded them by German authorities. But the “autonomy” of the Jewish Council existed only insofar as its activities remained in line

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\(^{23}\) I am indebted to Michal Unger who provided a succinct and illuminating explanation of the division of labor among the various institutions that constituted the German occupation authority in her introduction to the translated works of Josef Zelkowski. See Josef Zelkowski, *In Those Terrible Days: Writings from the Lodz Ghetto*, ed. Michal Unger, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002), 19–29.
with the objectives of German authorities. A decree from 28 November 1939 designated as the sole task of Jewish Councils in the *Wartheland* region to support and implement German directives. Rumkowski and the Łódź Jewish Council walked a fine line between the destructive demands and policies of the German authority and the internal demands of the Jewish population. Institutions and initiatives that supported Jewish life in the ghetto served to mask the evolution and implementation of the German plan to annihilate the Jews of Łódź.

Rumkowski had assumed control of all Jewish institutions with the establishment of the Jewish Council in October 1939. In 1940 and 1941 Rumkowski oversaw the creation of a large ghetto bureaucracy to manage the pressing needs of the population and support his vision for the ghetto populace. Rumkowski ruled as an autocrat demanding complete subordination from various departmental heads and advisors. Among the most pressing matters that faced Rumkowski’s administration in the first years of the ghetto period were managing the distribution of food and shelter. From the beginning, hunger ravaged the Jews living in the second largest ghetto in German-occupied Europe. Germans supplied little food, and the hierarchical scheme for food distribution in the ghetto privileged the few that occupied elite positions in the administration. Starvation allowed for the rampant spread of disease—tuberculosis and typhoid, in particular—which resulted in a staggering mortality rate of 21 percent during the ghetto period. Jewish factories in Łódź exported all products—shoes, bedding, textiles, metal and wood works, clothing—out of the ghetto in support of the German war effort. But the expansion of production was slow and the majority of the ghetto population was still out of work, hungry, and restless.
In summer and fall 1940 leftist activists who opposed Rumkowski and blamed him for the horrendous living conditions organized riots against the leader. Rumkowski ruthlessly quashed the demonstrations, effectively ending political opposition to his rule in the ghetto. In response to widespread suffering due to hunger and unemployment, Rumkowski secured a loan of two million Marks from the German authorities to institute a public welfare system in the ghetto under the auspices of the Welfare Department. Announcement no. 123 on 20 September outlined a program of graduated monetary assistance for those in need. The first relief campaign from 20 September to 20 October 1940 granted assistance to nearly 80 percent of the ghetto population (124,773 people).

During this phase of the ghetto period, the Jews of Łódź retained some semblance of prewar cultural, religious, and social activities. Religious Jews held minyans, assembled groups to study Torah, and established kosher soup kitchens. Soup kitchens of all kinds served as meeting places for like-minded political and social groups. Poets and artists continued to produce art. Musicians composed and performed music for the ghetto inhabitants. Members of the Bund and Zionist organizations managed youth group activities. Communist activists dedicated themselves to improving working conditions in the ghetto factories. Officially sanctioned cultural activities began in March 1941 with the establishment of the House of Culture.

After September 1942 all these activities were in sharp decline. The Chairman made Jewish labor the centerpiece of the ghetto’s strategy for survival, and the largest administrative departments managed the creation and expansion of ghetto industry. Recruiting tailors in the ghetto allowed Rumkowski to open the first tailor shop with 300 employees in May 1940. Industrial expansion was constant. By September of that year
seventeen workshops [Arbet-resortn in Yiddish] were in operation. At the end of 1943 over one hundred workshops employed 73,782 people in the ghetto.

The third phase of occupation was marked by the escalation of German plans for the murder of Jews living in the Łódź ghetto. The centrality of the Łódź ghetto in German plans for the annihilation of European Jewry became apparent in fall 1941. For the first two years of the ghetto period German authorities battled over the purpose of the Łódź ghetto.\(^{24}\) Power struggles among German authorities revolved around who would profit from the forced labor of their Jewish captives. Arthur Greiser, Hans Biebow, and Friedrich Übelhör benefited from the support of Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments. These regional and local authorities sought to preserve the ghetto in order to exploit the production potential of Jewish labor. Not only did a productive ghetto support the Reich, it also generated enormous wealth for local officials. Other key authorities, primarily SS officials Adolf Eichmann, Reinhard Heydrich, and Heinrich Himmler, lobbied for the immediate dissolution of the ghetto and transfer of all remaining assets to central authorities. On the eve of Operation Barbarossa, an SS officer in Poznań, Rolf-Heinz Hoeppner, relayed his suspicions about the motivations of the local authorities to Adolf Eichmann. Hoeppner wrote: “I believe Übelhör, president of the Łódź district, does not favor the liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto because it gives him an opportunity to earn a

great deal of money.”  

Those German leaders who wanted to exploit the ghetto inhabitants for economic gain won out until summer 1941, when the Wehrmacht launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union.

In the wake of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, preparations for the “Final Solution” began in Łódź. In October and November 1941 German authorities transported 20,000 Jews from cities in Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Moravia, and Luxembourg into the ghetto in Łódź. The massive influx of people caused terrible strain for the community already in Łódź as well as for the newcomers, most of them older men and women, forced into an unfamiliar environment without the resources necessary to navigate their new reality. People continued to flood into the ghetto through the summer of 1942 as German authorities destroyed smaller ghettos of the Wartheland region, killing many people and sending those who remained to the ghetto in Łódź.

As refugees streamed into the ghetto throughout 1941 and 1942, the Germans commenced a series of direct attacks on the ghetto that resulted in the murder of nearly 45 percent of the ghetto population. In December 1941, German officials initiated operations at the killing center in Chełmno [Kulmhof in German], just thirty miles northwest of the ghetto. Commencement of mass murder in Chełmno initiated a period of uncertainty, terror, and destruction for the Jews of Łódź. Between 16 January and 12 September 1942 more than 70,000 Jews were taken from the ghetto and murdered at Chełmno. Local German authorities implemented this series of “actions” [Aktionen] by co-opting Jewish institutions and demanding cooperation from the Jewish leadership.

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The transports of 1942 culminated in a final, devastating *Aktion* in September 1942 known as the *Shpere*. The Yiddish designation for the *Aktion* came from the German word *Gehsperre*, meaning “curfew,” referring to the German order that demanded the Jews of Łódź remain in their houses during the days of the *Aktion*. Biebow demanded from Rumkowski a list of 20,000 names to include ghetto inhabitants under the age of ten and older than sixty-five. September 5-12 was a violent week that left no family untouched and transformed the community overnight.

The *Shpere Aktion* was a watershed event in the ghetto and marked a new phase of Jewish life under German occupation. After September 1942 the ghetto effectively functioned as a work camp. The ghetto reached near full employment by 1943, with 85 to 95 percent of the remaining population worked in the ghetto’s workshops. Communal institutions closed. Social and cultural activities were minimal. Political groups, inasmuch as they still functioned, moved underground. Religious practice retreated from public spaces. The power that Rumkowski had consolidated over the previous two years into unchallenged authoritarian rule was undermined by his cooperation with the murderous German *Aktion*. German authorities further undermined his rule when they transferred control of major responsibilities to other ghetto leaders. After the Shpere, David Gertler (b. 15 February 1911) already head of the *Sonderabteilung*, assumed control of the supply division. Aaron Jakubowicz (b. 28 June 1910) assumed responsibility for the *ressorts*.26 In addition to the dispersion of responsibilities among Jewish leaders, German authorities increased their direct involvement in the internal affairs of the ghetto.

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26 Isaiah Gutman, introduction to *Łódź Ghetto* by Isaiah Trunk, xl.
The Łódź Ghetto existed longer than any other ghetto in German-occupied Europe. The ghetto’s longevity could be attributed to three interconnected reasons. First, Rumkowski amassed a workforce in the ghetto that wielded enormous production potential that paid for the expenses of maintaining the ghetto community and could be exploited by all levels of the German authority. Second, the purpose of the ghetto in the context of German plans to annihilate the Jews caused protracted conflicts among various levels of the German hierarchy. Third, the evolution of events on the warfront had direct impact on German plans for the Łódź ghetto and the Jews who lived within its walls. The second two points were most influential in determining the existence of the ghetto.

From the outset Rumkowski developed a strategy for survival based on the only thing the Jews could offer their occupiers: labor. In the first months of the ghetto period the Jewish leader justified his plan to the ghetto community and the German authorities as a way of securing the resources necessary for survival—food and shelter. It was not until October 1940 that German officials agreed the ghetto would continue to exist for the sake of production. During the implementation of the “Final Solution” through phased transports to Chełmno in 1942, the implications of “survival through work” shifted. Employment was no longer a means to procure food and shelter but was essential in avoiding death. German authorities bolstered the myth by demanding that “unproductive” ghetto inhabitants be delivered for transport out of the ghetto.

German power struggles over the purpose and fate of the Łódź ghetto developed over years within the context of the “Final Solution.” At every level of the German power structure officials vied for control of the “spoils” of Łódź: SS-leader Heinrich Himmler, Minister of Armaments Albert Speer, Gauleiter Arthur Greiser, central tax authorities, the
city government in Łódź, Biebow’s Ghettoverwaltung, and the Kripo. Until 1942 local leaders curried favor with the upper echelons of German power structure by exploiting the ghetto labor force for the benefit of the Reich. At the same time, officials and the local and regional levels lined their own pockets with the profits of Jewish slave labor.

A turning point came in 1942 when SS-leader Heinrich Himmler attempted to expand his power and escalate plans for the annihilation of the Jews. In July 1942 Himmler issued a decree that ordered the evacuation of Jews in the Generalgouvernement by the end of the year. In early 1943 he turned his attention to areas beyond the Generalgouvernment. As part of this initiative, Himmler ordered the chief of SS and Police in the Lublin district, Odilo Globocnik,27 to carry out the liquidation of the Łódź ghetto and transfer people deemed to be productive elements to ghettos near Lublin. Competition within the German hierarchy prevented Himmler’s consolidation of power and, as a result, briefly extended the life of the Łódź ghetto.28

As the Wehrmacht suffered more losses on the eastern front and the Soviet Red Army advanced westward, plans for the Łódź ghetto changed course. Advancing Soviet forces and the Jewish uprising at Sobibor in October 1943 exacerbated uncertainties among the Nazi leadership. In retaliation, Himmler ordered the murder of Jews living in ghettos under Globocnik’s control and directed his focus to Łódź. In December 1943 the SS-leader dispatched a team from the economic bureau, headed by Max Horn, to assess the circumstances and requirements for transforming the Łódź ghetto into a concentration

27 As a leader in the implementation of Operation Reinhard, Globocnik had overseen the murder of Jews in the Generalgouvernment including the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto.

28 Most notably, Albert Speer and Arthur Greiser opposed Himmler’s plan. Speer intervened with Hitler in Berlin, and Greiser refused to lend any local support to Globocnik as he attempted to carry out Himmler’s orders.
camp. Both Albert Speer and Hans Biebow intervened once again and successfully delayed the transformation for a few more months. In February 1944, a meeting between Hitler and Greiser produced a final compromise that ordered the ghetto transformed into a concentration camp. Toward this end, Hitler ordered the reactivation of the death camp at Chelmno, where 7,000 Jews from Łódź were killed in June and July 1944.29

Operations at Chelmno halted again as the Red Army pushed back German lines. In advance of the Wehrmacht retreat authorities diverted the remaining ghetto Jews—65,000 of them—to Auschwitz-Birkenau where many of them, including Rumkowski, were murdered. The Soviet Army liberated Łódź on 19 January 1945. A hasty German retreat insured that the liberators discovered well-documented evidence of the destruction of the Jews of Łódź, but only a few hundred Jews, who had been in hiding, remained to greet Soviet forces. More than 200,000 Jews lived in the Łódź ghetto from May 1940 until January 1945. Fewer than 10,000 people survived.

Historiography

This project on elderly in the Łódź Ghetto drew on established and recent trends that have shaped the study of the Holocaust. Two scholarly contexts have been particularly influential in my approach. First, recent attention to Jewish responses to Nazi assault has attempted to bridge a long-standing gap between “perpetrator” and “victim” histories of the Holocaust. Second, histories of the Łódź ghetto, beginning with accounts written at the time, provided a well-established framework for understanding internal ghetto life in the context of an evolving German “Final Solution” to the so-called Jewish

29 The murder of Jews in the gas vans at Chelmno had previously ceased in March 1943.
question. This body of literature also revealed significant gaps in our knowledge about
the ghetto. Crucial to my reading of the historical scholarship were social scientific
approaches to understanding aging and the aged. Such works emphasized the distinctive
character of adulthood at the end of the life cycle and drew my attention to the important
rolls that older adults play in the transference of social norms and the maintenance of
unity or disillusion of social structures in a given community.

Focused attention on Jewish responses to persecution influenced the analysis and
presentation of my research on older Jews in the Łódź Ghetto. Postwar scholarship on the
Third Reich and the Holocaust developed in two directions. Scholars of the Third Reich,
exemplified in the foundational work of Raul Hilberg, approached the subject from the
point of view of the perpetrators of mass murder, using German sources and giving little
agency to the victims of Holocaust. 30 At the same time, an interdisciplinary effort by
scholars, many in Jewish studies, explored the history and experiences of the victims. 31 In
the first generation of Holocaust literature, this bifurcation between perpetrator and
victim history dominated the field. A few exceptions, notably Saul Friedländer and Leni
Yahil, pioneered a growing trend in the field by analyzing sources from both victims and
perpetrators to create an integrated history of the Holocaust. 32

30 For example, see Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews. (Chicago, Quadrangle
Books, 1961); also Gerald Reitlinger, The Final Solution: The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe

31 See early attempts to understand Jewish experiences in the ghettos: Samuel Gringauz, “Some
Methodological Problems in the Study of the Ghetto,” Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January
1950): 65-72. For example, see Bruno Bettelheim, Surviving and Other Essays (New York: Knopf, 1979);
Yehuda Bauer, They Chose Life: Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust (New York: American Jewish

32 Saul Friedländer, Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939
(New York: Harper Collins, 1997); Saul Friedländer, The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the
This dissertation is both part and a product of the move toward an integrated history. Influential in the design, implementation, and outcome of my research have been the efforts of emerging scholars to weave together a multi-dimensional history of the Holocaust and the evolving interests of experienced scholars. Particularly important have been works that illuminate the complexity and variety of Jewish life sustained, created, and desecrated under German occupation. Yehuda Bauer’s 2009 work on Jewish community in the kresney region of Eastern Poland revealed the broader significance of my specialized project on the experiences of older Jews in Łódź. Bauer explored the potential for Jewish unity and the possibilities of resistance in Jewish communities living in shtetlekh first under Soviet occupation and then Nazi rule after June 1941. Bauer claimed a simple goal: “I know that they died,” he wrote; “I want to know how they lived.” This sentiment is echoed in works across the field.


33 For example, Christopher Browning’s work on the slave-labor camp at Starachowicze utilizes oral testimonies from survivors, a marked methodological shift from his previous work with German documents. See Christopher Browning, Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

34 Kresney refers to the area of marshland surrounding the Pripyat River in Eastern Europe. The region was part of Poland at the outbreak of the Second World War. After the German invasion and subsequent partition of Poland in September 1939, the peoples of this region—Belorussians, Ukrainians, Jews, and Poles—came under Soviet occupation. The Wehrmacht assault on the Soviet Union brought the area under German rule in July 1941. The towns at the center of Bauer’s study are currently located in Belarus and Ukraine.

35 Yehuda Bauer, The Death of the Shtetl (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 7. Bauer also explored the concept of amidah in relationship to “resistance” in his early work. Bauer rejected the word “resistance” because of the inherent association made with armed resistance. Amidah, on the other hand, Bauer argues, is a more inclusive term that allows for a more expansive understanding of how Jews responded to German persecution. The term also holds another meaning in the religious context, where it refers to a Jewish prayer. See Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking the Holocaust (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 26, 120, 134, 136, 143-163.

36 Bauer, The Death of the Shtetl, 6.
Scholarly initiatives toward an integrated history bring together disciplinary approaches, national contexts, and seemingly divergent source bases to deepen our understanding of the development of Nazi ideology, implementation of the “final solution,” and responses of persecuted peoples. The United Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (hereafter, CAHS) has developed a number of programs and projects that highlight the importance of analyzing Jewish responses. Scholarly focus on Jewish responses to Nazi persecution in turn allowed for the creation of an integrated history of the Holocaust. In a multi-volume series entitled “Documenting Life and Destruction,” CAHS has aimed to shed light on the varied responses of European Jews to emerging threats in the context of Germany’s implementation of the “Final Solution” by highlighting the sources of the victims. Recent works by Alexandra Garbarini and Samuel Kassow and the edited volume by Robert Moses Shapiro have emphasized the rich variety of experiences chronicled by

37 The “Documenting Life and Destruction” series, edited by Jürgen Matthäus, encompasses two publishing initiatives. One is a five-volume documentary collection entitled Jewish Responses to Persecution. The first two volumes of this series are in print. See Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, eds., Jewish Responses to Persecution. Volume I, 1933-1938 (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010); Alexandra Garbarini and Emil Kerenji, eds., Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume 2, 1938 - 1940 (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). Volume III examines “the unfolding implementation of the ‘Final Solution’” in 1941-1942. Volume IV covers the “‘Final Solution’ in full operation” and the intense struggle for survival in the years 1942-1944. The final volume looks at the last stages of persecution and “life after liberation” in 1944-1946. Also published in the series are stand-alone volumes focusing on Jewish responses. Patricia Heberer, Children during the Holocaust, Documenting Life and Destruction (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011); and Gábor Kádár and László Csösz, The Holocaust in Hungary (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, forthcoming).
individual victims of the Holocaust. Even fictional works, such as Chava Rosenfarb’s *Trilogy of Life*, provide insight into the complex web of familial and communal bonds in the ghettos.

Scholarly interest in the ghettos of German-occupied Europe shaped the task of weaving together previously separate strands of historical narrative. The extensive institutional projects of both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem produced multi-volume encyclopedias that identify, characterize, and define Nazi ghettos and provide excellent reference collections. Specialized and general studies shed light on aspects of daily life in the ghettos where Jews attempted to reconstruct prewar cultural and social life and maintain

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some semblance of normalcy. 41 Tim Cole’s attention to space offers new ways of understanding ghettoization itself. 42 In the 2011 work The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust, Dan Michman challenged the idea that ghettoization was a uniform process across German-occupied Europe and dispelled assumptions that the creation of ghettos was a top-down process. Michman argued that ghettos were erected and maintained at different times for different purposes: ghettoization was not a systematic process as scholars had described it in the past. 43

A concurrent project organized by the USHMM reiterated the local and varied nature of Jewish ghettos. As participants in an interdisciplinary workshop, “Geographies of the Holocaust,” historian Tim Cole and geographer Alberto Giordano applied their disciplinary methodologies to reassess the process of ghettoization in Budapest. Mapping the daily lives of Jews in Budapest between January and May 1944, Cole and Giordano uncovered “the tensions between concentration and dispersion, visibility and invisibility,


and accessibility and inaccessibility,” to better understand the segregation of Jews in one city.44

Renewed interest in German-run ghettos provided scholars a locus for weaving together varied methodologies, multiple source bases, and varied historical experiences in an effort to create an integrated understanding of the events of the Shoah. But this innovation was not entirely new. In fact the first studies conducted to document the German-led destruction of European Jewry were written by scholars and lay people themselves targeted for death in the ghettos. Samuel Kassow’s book on Emanuel Ringelblum’s Oyneg Shabbes archive in the Warsaw ghetto demonstrated the important work that Ringelblum, a historian, and others did to document the destruction surrounding them.45 A similar initiative in the Łódź Ghetto produced the multi-volume Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto in addition to thousands of the pages of sociological reportage, a biographical and lexicon-driven encyclopedia, essays, and personal reflections written by philosophers, journalists, and writers, all very astute in their observations. The Chronicle, the Ghetto Encyclopedia, and other commissioned essays were collected under the auspices of the Statistical Department.46

44 USHMM, “Holocaust Geographies,” Jack and Anita Hess Faculty Seminar, Washington, D.C., August 2007. Cole and Giordano were two of nine faculty participants. A summary of their collaborative work including the historical GIS maps produced during the seminar can be seen on the Museum’s website: http://www.ushmm.org/maps/projects/holocaust-geographies/?content=budapest.

45 Kassow, Who Will Write Our History?

46 Rumkowski commissioned the secret activities of the archives in 1941 under the auspices of the Statistical Department. As one of the major initiatives of the Ghetto Archives, the Bulletin of the Daily Chronicle [Biuletyn Kroniki Codziennej], directed by Łódź native Stanislaw Cukier-Cerski, summarized the daily events of the ghetto beginning on 12 January 1942. Upon the arrival of German, Czech, and Austrian Jews in October and November 1941, the Chronicle staff was expanded to include a handful of the newly arrived ghetto inmates. A critical language shift occurred in September 1942, when the Daily Bulletin became the Tageschronik and entries were written in German. In March 1943, Oskar Singer, a philosopher from Prague, assumed the position of director.
This dissertation utilizes the work produced in the ghetto as an invaluable source of information. At the same time, I have been influenced by the desire to present a view of the day-to-day triumphs and struggles of the individual Jews of Łódź and the need to enter into the historical record forgotten names and trace the systematic destruction of a community in the last years of its existence.

The Łódź ghetto produced a wide array of sources documenting the destruction of the community from the viewpoints of perpetrators, eyewitnesses, and survivors. The breadth of surviving documentation has invited scholarly inquiries for decades and produced a substantial corpus of literature on the ghetto in Yiddish, Hebrew, English, German, and Polish. In the decade immediately following the war, A. Wolf Jasny,47 Josef Wulf,48 and Philip Friedman published initial scholarship on the ghetto in Łódź that provided the foundation for scholarly debates that raged in the 1960s.49

Isaiah Trunk’s seminal sociological study, Lodzsher Geto, appeared in 1962. Trunk offered a critical contribution with his precise description of the forced ghettoization of Łódź Jewry, the development of the Jewish administration, the internal


life of the ghetto, and the destruction of the ghetto by the Germans. Trunk’s detractors pointed out flaws in his work, criticized his lack of analysis, and suggested that his assessment of Rumkowski was too harsh. Trunk tempered some of his criticisms, particularly of Rumkowski’s leadership, in his later work on the Jewish Councils.

Translation of the original text into English in 2006 made Trunk’s work available to a wider audience and ensured that it would remain an invaluable introduction to the Łódź Ghetto.

Historians of the Nazi era concerned with the purpose of ghettos in Eastern Europe sought to place them in the context of implementation of the “Final Solution.” Was the plan to annihilate European Jewry realized in a linear, centralized progression? Or was it the result of local initiatives that evolved in a more pragmatic and haphazard fashion? The establishment, administration, and longevity of the Łódź ghetto were central to analysis of these questions.


53 In 2006 an excellent English translation of the original text was published that included translated documents, a number of instructive introductions to Trunk and his work, and insightful editorial commentary by editor Robert Moses Shapiro. See Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto.*

The publication and translation of primary source materials from the Łódź ghetto during the last decades of the twentieth century added to this growing body of literature.\textsuperscript{55} Arguably the most valuable of these endeavors was publication of the *Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto*. Unabridged versions of the entire collection are now available in Polish, Hebrew, and German, and a condensed version is available in English.\textsuperscript{56} Benefiting from the descriptive and experiential nature of previous generations of scholarship, recent research has contributed to the evolving analytical framework for understanding the history of the Łódź ghetto, its German administrators, and its Jewish occupants.

In the last two decades emerging scholars have produced important works in English, Hebrew, German, and Polish. Israeli scholar Michal Unger has remained at the


forefront of new scholarship on the Łódź ghetto. Unger has been responsible for translations of critical primary sources from the ghetto. Her command of the sources and insightful analysis enabled a clear presentation of the complex inner-workings of ghetto life. Andrea Löw’s expansive social history of the ghetto revealed moments of cohesion and atomization within the community. Gordon Horowitz’s insights provided a framework for understanding the parallel developments in Łódź during the German occupation—the isolation and destruction of the Jewish community in the ghetto and the creation of a Nazi city in the far eastern region of the Reich. Cultural studies, such as Gila Flam’s *Singing for Survival*, add texture of the daily lives of the people who inhabited the ghetto and demonstrate the ways in which Jews living *in extremis* developed coping mechanisms to process the destruction that surrounded them.

Important German-language scholarship delves deeper into the complex and varied

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evolution of the “Final Solution” in the Wartheland region, building a framework for understanding the external forces that affected the lives of Jews in the Łódź Ghetto.

Doctoral dissertations recently completed and currently in progress suggest there is still much to be learned about the Łódź ghetto.

If there exists an expansive body of literature chronicling and analyzing the ghetto in Łódź, then what justifies further study, and how does this dissertation enhance what is already known? Age is fundamental to my study. As a category of historical analysis, age has been under-utilized and under-theorized in research on the Holocaust. The neglect of old age as a subject of historical inquiry is not particular to Holocaust studies. Studies of the aged and aging have generally been relegated to the realm of social sciences, although social historians have produced a small though growing body of scholarship that explores the aged and aging in the past. Susannah Ottaway, a historian of eighteenth-century England, opened a 2004 monograph with the claim that scholarship was engaged in a “search for the elusive ‘golden age of aging.””


See the dissertation by Helene Julia Sinnreich, The Supply and Distribution of Food to the Łódź Ghetto: A Case Study in Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939-1945 (Brandeis University, 2004). Relevant dissertations are in progress by Rachel Iskov (Clark University) and Amy Shapiro (Indiana University, Bloomington).


Recently historians have begun to recognize the importance of age as an analytical concept in Holocaust studies. Childhood experiences have been given the most attention in this regard. Scholarship on the Holocaust generally mentions older Jews only in passing or without regard to their age. A few notable exceptions from recent research highlight old age as a significant factor in shaping the experiences of Jews living under German rule. My research on the elderly in the ghettos aims to highlight the importance of age in shaping Jewish experiences during the Holocaust. Elderly Jews living in the Łódź ghetto brought with them a specific set of experiences and problems that influenced how they reacted to and comprehended their new reality of subjugation, humiliation, and pervasive death.

Forced Collective Aging

Placing the experiences of older Jews at the center of an analysis reveals the potency of age as an analytical tool for understanding the destructive force of Nazi

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65 In the past 25 years scholars of the Holocaust have started to explore age as a category of analysis, focusing primarily on childhood and adolescence. Since the 1980s there have been a handful of studies published on the experiences and fate of children. Most recently see Patricia Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press in association with the USHMM, 2011). A recently defended doctoral dissertation at University of Wisconsin examined narratives of child survivors. See Mary Kirsh, “The Lost Children of Europe: Narratives of the Rehabilitation of Child Holocaust Survivors in Great Britain and Israel,” (PhD. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2012). In December 2012, the 44th Annual Conference of Association for Jewish Studies included a panel featured a panel entitled “Children in Ghettos: Life, School, Play.” Panelists presented work on lives of children at home, at school, and at play in the ghetto. A presentation from Annabelle Baldwin (Monash University) explored the topic of sexual violence against children in hiding.

66 Although not the primary subject of her analysis, Alexandra Garbarini’s work revealed the isolation of the elderly. See Garbarini, *Numbered Days*. As part of her doctoral project on the social history of Theresienstadt, Anna Hájková has examined the experiences of the elderly. See Anna Hájková, “Prisoner Society in the Tereziín Ghetto” (University of Toronto, 2013); also Hájková, “Mutmaßungen über deutsche Juden: Alte Menschen aus Deutschland im Theresienstädtter Ghetto,” in Andrea Löw, Doris L. Bergen, and Anna Hájková, eds., *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013).
ideology and practice. Old age was both a chronological fact and a powerful metaphor for the process of destruction suffered by individuals, families, and the Jewish collective incarcerated in Łódź. In the Łódź ghetto Jews experienced a process of rapid collective aging. Scholars have noted the chaos that reigned in the ghetto during the first years of the ghetto period, in particular from January 1942, when the Germans initiated incremental plans for the murder of Jews living in Łódź, through the Shpere Aktion of September 1942. The concept of aging, specifically the process of moving closer to death, challenges generally accepted interpretations of the ghetto after 1942.

The “chaos” attributed to the period leading up the Shpere can be understood more accurately as the cacophony of Jewish responses attempting to make sense of uncertainty and suspected death. German-organized transports to the death camp at Chelmno during 1942 forced Jews of all ages to respond to the loss of loved ones and grapple with the uncertainty—or worse, the looming certainty—of their own fates. In the context of such massive personal and communal loss, coping mechanisms and survival tactics that had promoted life and unity in previous years fell short. The disappearance and murder of 70,000 ghetto inhabitants in a matter of months ensured the dissolution of social structures fundamental to community cohesion and resulted in the irreversible atomization of the community.

In retrospect expressions of grief and mourning, resolve to live and decisions to die, cultural creation and abandonment, individual and community initiatives in the ghetto appeared chaotic and often contradictory. The coexistence of these seemingly conflicting Jewish responses to German policies of violence and exploitation suggests a new way of interpreting the German-initiated process of destruction. The realities of life
in the ghetto—starvation, hard labor, disease, family degradation, and social tensions—accelerated a trajectory toward death for the individual and the community. The existential dilemma of individuals faced with death was mirrored in the decline of the community. German policies that aimed to destroy the Jewish community in Łódź did so through a process of forced collective aging.

The _Shpere Aktion_ in September 1942 was a watershed event in the aging of the ghetto. German authorities removed from the ghetto and murdered two generations of people—killing individuals on the spot, dismembering families, and dismantling vital social networks. The absence of people sixty-five and older as well as children under ten stripped the community of its living connection with the past and its potential for a future. Without the generational reference points of children and older adults, the remaining segment of the population aged overnight. The “calm” that prevailed in the ghetto after September 1942 should not be thought of as routine or peaceful. Rather a profound grief permeated the remnant group left in the ghetto in the wake of the _Shpere_. What was a community without its elderly and its children? In Łódź after September 1942 there no longer existed a community but rather a collection of Jews living side-by-side, subject to the whim of German rule.

Sources

The topic of elderly Holocaust victims poses specific challenges regarding sources. Eyewitness accounts written by older Jews in the ghetto were rare. Prewar social factors including poverty and a general lack of education among the cohort who would be the aged of the 1930s and 1940s contributed to the absence of sources attributed to older Jews. The aged suffered the effects of hunger, disease, and hard labor at higher rates than
younger adults and teens, and the physical frailty common among people of advanced age was another factor contributing to the lack of sources. The absence of obvious and substantial sources, such as diaries or personal essays, written by elderly authors in the ghetto could easily dissuade interested scholars from tackling such an elusive topic. Nevertheless contemporary sources are critical to understanding the elderly in the ghetto. Finding materials that documented the experiences of the aged required combing through thousands of pages in search of key terms specific to old age.

The project at hand relies primarily on sources generated during the period of German occupation in Łódź, including records of the German administration, official documents of the Jewish Administration, and personal sources. Of utmost importance were archival collections currently housed in Berlin, Jerusalem, New York, and Washington, DC. One of the few collections that holds documents written by older Jews in the ghetto exists among the surviving records of the Eldest of the Jews of Łódź. The collection consists of 21,105 unique files and covers the activities of the more than thirty agencies that comprised the Jewish administration in the ghetto, which employed 13-14,000 people in the ghetto. Of particular interest in this rich and vast collection of sources were petitions written by older men and women to the Jewish Council. Needy ghetto residents, many of them elderly, petitioned the Council for assistance. Between July 1940 and August 1942, Rumkowski’s office received over 500 petitions written by and on behalf of older ghetto inhabitants requesting admission to old age homes run by

67 The original collection is housed at the Polish State Archives in Łódź. I viewed copies of the materials at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. See USHMM, RG-15.083M.
the community. From a few sparse lines to pages of densely packed text, each petition offered an intimate view into the particular plight of older Jews in the Łódź ghetto.

The memoranda, announcements, and officially sanctioned reports of both the German and Jewish administrations responsible for the ghetto were also crucial for understanding the effects of German policies on the aged in particular and the community more broadly. The Nachman Zonabend collection housed at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research proved critical in piecing together official Jewish policies regarding the aged, especially in understanding the social welfare apparatus in the ghetto. Reportage from Josef Zelkowicz in his official capacity as an employee of the administration was particularly instructive in comprehending the Jewish administration’s evolving perceptions of older Jews in the ghetto. Cultural artifacts—including songs, poetry, and photographs—were also valuable in showing how the community perceived its elders.

Reading official Jewish sources in conjunction with materials produced by German authorities permitted reconstruction of the complex and evolving interplay between German demands and Jewish responses. From 1940 to 1942 the Jewish Council in Łódź developed policies that valued the lives and welfare of the aged despite their general inability to support Rumkowski’s strategy for survival—“salvation through work.” Older men and women expected aid from the community in order to achieve the ultimate goal—survival. The expectation that Rumkowski would support the aged in the ghetto was either realized or constricted based on the practical and ideological considerations that determined German policies. Documents generated by local and central German authorities reveal the position of elderly Jews in official Nazi ideology

68 See USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90.
and policies. Read together, contemporary Jewish and German sources reveal surprising levels of contingency and also agency. This was not a sector of the population doomed to death from the beginning. Nor did the aged accept a tragic fate due to their natural proximity to death.

In addition to archival material, published sources including personal diaries, essays, poetry, and songs offered a critical window into the experiences of older Jews in the Łódź ghetto. To understand the struggle for life in the first years of the ghetto period and the collective trauma that occurred during the *Shpere Aktion*, it was imperative to focus on sources generated as close to the events as possible. Contemporary sources capture the mounting tensions, the uncertainty, and the unmitigated emotional reactions of those involved in ways that postwar materials cannot. Personal sources are invaluable in understanding the interpersonal relationships of the aged, particularly within the context of the family.

Diaries, essays, chronicles, and petitions written in the ghetto reveal moments of great cohesion among family members and also the devastating dissolution of familial relationships. They offer details about the changing nature of intra- and intergenerational relationships, provide instructive insights into the day-to-day lives of the aged, and shed light on perceptions of the aged among members of other generations. All of the diaries known to have survived from the ghetto in Łódź were written by younger and middle-aged ghetto inhabitants. The immediacy of diary writing offers a view of the destructive effects of German policies on Jewish families that often get lost in postwar memoirs and testimonies. Personal sources from the ghetto period also capture the depth of grief and
uncertainty in the moment before a person’s interpretation is altered by the knowledge of events to come.

That this analysis privileges contemporary sources should not be understood as a dismissal of critical source materials generated after the war. Postwar materials—memoirs, testimonies, and interviews—provide a different perspective on the experiences of the elderly in ghetto society. Such reflections from a distance shed light on intergenerational relationships, the challenges of generational transference, and the profound absence of older Jews in the ghetto after September 1942. But memoirs and testimonies written decades after the war are more likely to highlight family cohesion in a way that memorializes elderly parents and grandparents. Contemporaneous sources also depicted positive reciprocal relationships between the older and younger generations of a family. But contemporary observers were much more forthcoming about familial tensions that, in some cases, resulted in a complete rupture of relationships among family members.

69 Testimony collections at USHMM and Yad Vashem offer a wealth of personal narratives from survivors, in both written and oral forms. Published memoirs were also a critical source for this dissertation. See, for instance, Sara Urbach, Perec Zylberberg, *This I Remember* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Studies of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2000); and Benjamin Kujawski, *My Long Road to Freedom* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Studies of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2002). The testimonies of Zylberberg and Kujawski are also available on the website of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies which hosts a collection of survivor memoirs. See [http://migs.concordia.ca/survivor.html](http://migs.concordia.ca/survivor.html); also Itzhak Cytrynowski, *I Will Remember*.

70 Na’ama Shik emphasized an important difference between testimonies and memoirs recorded in the immediate postwar era and those written decades later. Shik argued that this body of sources is valuable because the recollections recorded were still “fresh” and “uninfluenced by the way in which memory was shaped.” She suggested that those accounts written closer to the time were more likely to reveal visceral reactions of the writer to persecution and to reveal the brutality. See Na’ama Shik, “Infinite Loneliness: Some Aspects of the Lives of Jewish Women in the Auschwitz Camps According to Testimonies and Autobiographies Written Between 1945 and 1948,” in *Lessons and Legacies VIII: From Generation to Generation*, ed. Doris L. Bergen (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), pp. 125-156.
Terminology

A methodological challenge of the current project has been to develop coherent concepts and determine terminology appropriate for defining the generation of people at the center of this study and analyzing the violence that they experienced in the ghetto. Language typically used in both instances is imbued with preconceived notions that belie the nuance of individual experience and obfuscate the murderous outcomes of German policies. In the case of older Jews living in the ghetto, “elderly”, “aged”, and “old age” are elusive descriptors. Precise, universal definitions are not possible. I developed a general concept based on chronological markers, social prescriptions, generational identifiers, and historical circumstances. Most important, I allowed for flexibility in determining which ghetto residents were “old.” In the ghetto old age was just as likely to be determined by subjective determinants such as a person’s state of mind or physical stature as by a person’s date of birth.

Chronological parameters provided a starting point for conceptualizing old age in the Łódź ghetto. Given the centrality of the Shpere Aktion in understanding actual and metaphorical aging in the ghetto, age markers outlined by German officials were a logical point of departure. In September 1942 German authorities demanded the removal of elderly people, sixty-five and older. Based on these parameters my analysis would cover the activities and experiences of people born before 5 September 1877. The definition of “old” as prescribed by German authorities during the Shpere did not hold up in its practical application. Strict chronological guidelines for selecting Jews for murder blurred with more subjective criteria. Amidst the chaos that reigned 5-12 September, Gestapo officials gave little credence to birthdates when making their selections for
murder. People of all ages were designated for transport to Chełmno merely because they looked “old.” In practice the German concept of “old” was synonymous with “useless” and “unproductive.”

The communal assistance scheme devised by the Jewish administration also influenced the concept of “old age” utilized here. Rumkowski’s administration developed a welfare system that included the distribution of graduated monetary aid to those in need, based on age. The older the recipient, the larger the sum of aid. At age 60 needy ghetto residents received a larger amount of money than the rest of the adult population (defined as people between the ages of 15 and 59). Larger monthly sums were designated for ghetto inhabitants aged 70-79 and even larger payments for people 80 and older. The administration used the age of 60 as a line of demarcation frequently in its demographic studies and reports on the ghetto populace. The designation of sixty as the beginning of a new phase of adulthood had roots in the policies of the prewar kehilla (Jewish community council) in Łódź. The current study adopted the community’s designation of 60 years as a general chronological marker to define “older Jews” living in the Łódź ghetto.

If objective chronological markers provided a starting point for analysis, subjective notions of old age allowed for the expansion of analytical concepts at the core of this project. Numerical age was not the only factor in determining an “older person” in the ghetto. Personal, familial, and social identifications provided a critical lens for defining the aged. Included in this study were Jews who self-identified as “old” but were younger than sixty. Age identification was a product of self-assessment in the context of

life course and was shaped by a number of components—biological, psychological, physiological, socio-economic, and demographic. Ghetto inhabitants had a variety of reasons to feel older or present themselves as older than their years. Also important were external factors that identified men and women as older. Grandparents were included among the elderly and were especially important to family life in the ghetto.

That a person was perceived as older had deadly consequences by September 1942 and becomes a central theme of my analysis of the ghetto after the Shpere Aktion. At the end of the Łódź ghetto Aktion against children and elderly in September 1942, German authorities conducted a “random verification,” in which they forced residents to line up in the street for a “selection.” The Chronicle commented on the Germans’ criteria for identifying their elderly victims:

In many cases, however, outward appearance was the deciding factor in obtaining an exemption. It was observable that people who looked better, and particularly those wearing clean clothes, were not taken. There were cases of people over 70 being allowed to remain, while middle-aged men and even young people were taken if their appearance betrayed weak health.

In the ghetto a person’s perceived age was often a more critical component of the aging process that a person’s actual age. Perceptions of the aged were imbued with negative presumptions that equated aging with physical decline, illness, weakness, and inability to contribute to the whole.

Sociological conceptions of life course offered yet another critical component in the nations of “aging” and “old age” as applied in this dissertation. Life course


73 Dobroszycki, Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto, 254.
perspective suggests that the experiences and coping mechanisms developed in the early stages of the life cycle have a bearing on behavioral norms later in life. This “cradle-to-grave” understanding of life’s trajectory suggests that old age is a state of being in close proximity to death. Older men and women live with the realization that their time on earth is limited. While this is technically true for all people, it is a truth that becomes more apparent during the aging process. How a person copes with the end of the life cycle is shaped by the events, relationships, and experiences of a person’s formative years. Seen this way, in the Łódź ghetto, especially after September 1942, the entire captive population became “elderly.” Everyone lived in close proximity to death.

Why Łódź?

This dissertation is the outcome of a project that began with much broader ambitions. The initial proposal outlined a comparative analysis, incorporating elderly experiences in ghettos in Poland and Lithuania, based on the assumption that finding a substantial enough source base would be difficult. A wide net and a careful eye were essential in my search for references to the aged in each community, although to my surprise I found hundreds of pages of material. In the early months of research, I amassed an extensive array of sources that testified to the experiences of elderly Jews in the Łódź, Vilna, and Kovno ghettos, in addition to some of the smaller Jewish shtetlekh in Lithuania. So overwhelming was the breadth of sources that I felt compelled to narrow my scope.

The reasons for focusing on the Łódź ghetto were three-fold. First, there existed a unique and unparalleled connection between the generation of Jews born before the mid-1880s and the historical development of the city of Łódź. The older men and women in
this study were born at the end of an unprecedented population boom in Łódź. The population boom included a marked increase in the number of Jews that settled in the city. In 1873 there were approximately 10,000 Jews living in the city of Łódź. That number increased nearly tenfold in just over a decade. The 1897 census recorded nearly 100,000 Jews living in Łódź. By 1914 there were 170,000 Jews in the city. The demographic explosion was emblematic of population increases across Europe in the late nineteenth century. In Łódź demographic growth transformed the city into an industrial center. The men and women born in the mid-nineteenth century were responsible for that industrial success.

Industrialization and urbanization translated into great wealth for some Jews of this generation and at the same time spawned crushing poverty for the majority. The coexistence of these Jewish worlds in the “Manchester of Poland” generated an environment of tension. The generation of Jews, who were in their 60s and older during the German occupation, was the first to grow up in the bustling, industrial city of Łódź. Łódź at the turn of the century was a city brimming with potential conflict, and the Jews of this generation were a product of those tensions. They came of age in a time of rapid social, political, and religious change in the Polish-Jewish milieu. Movements that had taken root and slowly evolved in Jewish communities elsewhere in Europe exploded in the Jewish community in Łódź during the second half of the nineteenth century. The

74 Between 1823 and 1873 the population in Łódź doubled every 10 years.


76 The nature of the city in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century was masterfully captured by Yiddish novelist I.J. Singer in his 1936 novel The Brothers Ashkenazi.
birth and maturation of competing visions for the future—socialism, Zionism, nationalisms, orthodoxy, religious reform, assimilation, industrialization, social stratification—vied for the loyalties of this generation.

Revolutionary fervor spilled into the streets of Łódź in 1892 and 1905. In May 1892 industry in Łódź was brought to a standstill when 40,000 factory workers walked off the job to protest brutal work conditions and exploitative management practices. On the third day of the strike anti-Jewish riots broke out and spread across the city. Poles ransacked Jewish homes, looted Jewish businesses, and attacked Jews in the street. Two days later when Russian soldiers finally halted the violence, the streets of Łódź were covered in shattered glass from the windows of Jewish stores and down feathers from Jewish bedding. Although the generation of Jews under scrutiny here would have only fleeting memories of the 1892 strike, they were old enough to play a critical role in the Russian Revolution of 1905. Łódź was a hotbed of proletarian support in 1905, and Jews in early adulthood were on both sides of the revolutionary cause. World War I was a transformative experience for the 1880s generation and for Poland. Many Jews of that generation fought in the Russian army and then returned to fight for Polish independence in the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1921.

The position and influence of Jews in newly independent Poland provided the context for an existential struggle for the Polish nation and the Jews that resided within the new nation’s borders. In the 1920s and 1930s this generation encountered

77 Łódź historian Barbara Wachowska wrote an excellent English-language overview of the Revolt and the subsequent backlash, for the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies. The article can be found on the AAPJS website. See Barbara Wachowska, “The Revolt in 1892,” http://www.aapjstudies.org/112.
increasingly exclusionary visions of Polish nationhood that gained substantial popular support. At the same time an increasing number of Jews were speaking Polish, building economic relationships with their Polish neighbors, and embracing Polish culture.\textsuperscript{78}

Rumkowski, The Eldest of the Jews of Łódź

In addition to significant connections between the city and the generation at the center of this study, another factor in the decision to focus on Łódź was the prominence of the Jewish leader of the ghetto. It would be remiss to discuss the topic of elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto without addressing the most prominent and controversial among them. Since the ghetto period Rumkowski has been a lightning rod for controversies about the role of the Jewish leadership under German occupation.\textsuperscript{79} Beginning in the ghetto itself, Rumkowski’s impact on the fate of the Jews of Łódź has been oft debated, the man himself much maligned and occasionally defended.\textsuperscript{80} Apologetic interpretations defend Rumkowski’s actions in the ghetto, whereas the Jewish leader’s detractors offer harsh criticism that equates his policies with those of the German oppressor. More recent,

\textsuperscript{78} For more information see François Guesnet, \textit{Polnische Juden im 19. Jahrhundert: Lebensbedingungen. Rechtsnormen und Organisation im Wandl} (Köln: Böhlau, 1998.)

\textsuperscript{79} Solomon F. Bloom, “Toward the Ghetto Dictator,” \textit{Jewish Social Studies} 12, no. 1 (January 1950): 73-78; Rubin defended Rumkowski, Trunk criticized; Löw and Unger are judicious: see Kassow “The Case of Łódź” pp. 261-262.

judicious accounts place Rumkowski in Primo Levi’s “grey zone” that encompasses the actions of so many during the Holocaust.

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski was born on 27 February 1877 to a traditional Jewish family in the village of Illino in the Russian Empire. The details of his youth are unknown. Rumkowski’s education was limited to a few years of traditional Jewish education in *cheder* and a few years of elementary schooling. He most likely arrived in Łódź as an adult around the turn of the century where his career in trade and industry was marked by ups and downs. In the interwar years Rumkowski maintained a steady income as an insurance agent and established himself in political and philanthropic circles in Łódź. As a member of the Łódź kehilla, Rumkowski represented the General Zionist Party. Perhaps his most influential accomplishment before the war was the foundation and management of an orphanage at Helenowek, on the northern outskirts of Łódź.

At the time of his ascension to power in the community, many of Rumkowski’s contemporaries balked at his designation as leader of the ghetto and mocked his dictatorial style of leadership with designations such as “King Chaim.” Historical assessments, as charged as they have been, have conceded that the traits Rumkowski

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81 At the time of Rumkowski’s birth in 1877 the village of Illino was located in the Vitebsk region of the Russian Empire. According to census information from 1897 Illino, situated on the western Dvina River in present-day Belarus, had a total population of 1,415 people of which 78 percent (1105) were Jews.

82 Gutman questioned Rumkowski’s intentions in this venture but conceded the success of the institution. See Gutman, introduction to Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto*, xxxiii.

exhibited in his rule of the Łódź ghetto were evident in his personal, social, and political relationships before the war.\textsuperscript{84}

Positive and negative descriptions of Rumkowski both during and after the ghetto period focus on his age. On 13 October 1939, German authorities summoned a gathering of the Łódź kehilla. Out of this meeting came a new leader of the Jewish community: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. The exact details surrounding his appointment are disputed, but a number of accounts point to his age as a deciding factor. Rumkowski was 62 years old when he assumed the position of “Eldest of the Jews of Łódź.” In one version of events, the German official presiding over the meeting was most impressed with Rumkowski’s dignified appearance. Recounting the appointment decades later, Leonard Tushnet suggested that Rumkowski’s “erect” stature, “clean-shaven” look, “piercing blue eyes and a silvery head of hair” fulfilled the authorities’ expectations for “the Eldest.” According to Tushnet: “The title followed from the German belief in their own propaganda that a secret council of elders ruled over the Jews; if so, then the leader of that council must necessarily be ‘the Eldest.’”\textsuperscript{85}

Another version presented Rumkowski as an old fool. According to this account, the German presiding over the meeting asked for the älteste of the group to step forward, and Rumkowski understood the official to be asking for the “oldest” among them. Being the oldest out of the group, he stepped forward and sealed his fate as leader. In this story

\textsuperscript{84} Isaiah Trunk described Rumkowski’s traits as: “pursuit of honor and power, authoritarianism and persistence, powers of persuasion, organizational skills, and wanton exploitation of those around him for the goals he set himself.” See Trunk, \textit{Łódź Ghetto}, xxxiii.

Rumkowski’s rudimentary education and poor knowledge of German were the only reasons that he became the ghetto leader.\(^{86}\)

Postwar analysis has pointed out that none of these accounts have been substantiated by documentary evidence. The rumors that swirled around Rumkowski’s appointment were colored in the following years by individual assessments of his policies and activities in the ghetto. Accounts were infused with circumstantial drama and explicit distaste for or defense of Rumkowski. In his postwar memoirs Łódź ghetto survivor Itzhak Cytrynowski recounted his version of events. “Without much ceremony one of the Gestapo drew his gun at the assembled group and asked for the official ‘Eldest’ among them. One of the elderly members of the Board misunderstood the word as meaning literally the ‘oldest.’ He [Rumkowski] rose from his place and spoke up. ‘I am.’”\(^{87}\)

Although accounts of his assumption of power varied, all hinged on a common theme that was consistent in portrayals of Rumkowski—his age. Observers, contemporary and postwar, projected onto Rumkowski traits associated with archetypes of the “old man.”

Rumkowski’s policies in the ghetto were also subject to judgments based on positive and negative interpretations of old age. Contemporary observers noted his trademark shock of white or silver hair. Descriptions beyond that were colored by the personal feelings of the observer, and often alluded to traditional notions about old men. Cytrynowski’s physical description of Rumkowski called to mind the caricature of a

\(^{86}\) In his introduction to the abridged, English-language edition of the daily chronicle, Lucjan Dobroszycki summarized three popular explanations of Rumkowski’s assumption of the position. Dobroszycki discounted all three accounts citing lack of supporting documentation. The sources cited for each version of events are particularly helpful, including Tabaksblatt and Nirenberg. Dobroszycki offered a “general outline of the circumstances which led to Rumkowski’s emergence as the Eldest of the Jews.” See Dobroszycki, *Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto*, xliii-xlvi117-119.

feeble old man: “The old man with a white mane of hair on his head and heavy rimmed glasses, nodded silently and stood motionless. He was too afraid to ask the name of the [Gestapo] man who was speaking to him.”88 Yankl Hershkowitz’s popular song, “Rumkowski Chaim,” offered a description and sarcastic praise of Rumkowski: “Our Royal Highness has gray hair, May he live to be a hundred!”89

Chapter Summaries

The chronological scope of this dissertation is relatively short, spanning from May 1940 through September 1942. The aging Jews of the Łódź ghetto, the generations that preceded them, and the ones that followed took over a century to build the vibrant community that existed in Łódź at the time of the German invasion. Callous policies of the German occupation destroyed that community in a matter of months. Through the lens of aging, both actual and metaphorical, this dissertation reveals connections between the fate of the aged in the ghetto and the community as a whole. The chapters compose a narrative arguing that declining opportunities for survival among the aging population paralleled the degradation of the community itself. The decline and eventual death of the community reflected a process of collective aging.

Yet implications of the aging process—the movement of individuals and the collective toward death—do not accurately describe the content of the chapters that follow. The threat of death loomed large in the Łódź ghetto and does in this analysis, but

88 Ibid.
89 For an insightful analysis of the popular ghetto song and the context of its origins and performance see Flam, Singing for Survival, 30-48.
the focus of this dissertation is the last moments of life in a struggle against death. Despite closer chronological proximity to the end of life, older men and women were no more likely to accept death than younger ghetto residents. In examining the deaths of older Jews in the ghetto it is critical to cast aside the interpretative lens that relegates each death to an anonymous tragedy. Instead the effort here is to restore agency to the victims of the Holocaust. Among the aged some met death quietly, humbly. Others held court in the selection sites, preaching against injustice until they were herded onto trains bound for Chelmno. Still others fought the agony of starvation with every ounce of rage available to them. Each death was terrible in its injustice and finality, but death also afforded victims a final display of individual dignity.

The first three chapters cover the important social contexts of elderly experiences in the ghetto from May 1940 through early summer 1942. Each chapter explores ways in which aged Jews in the ghetto struggled for their own lives and contributed to the wellbeing of the larger community. Constant negotiations between the needs of older Jews and various communal objectives generated moments of cohesion and tension within the community. The escalating policies of German authorities during the first years of the ghetto period created an environment in which possibilities of survival among the elderly dwindled. Negotiations for survival in the contexts of work, family, and communal life chart the degradation of fundamental social structures.

Chapter One examines responses of the aged to the communal strategy for survival through production. The application of Rumkowski’s motto, “salvation through work,” provided the means for basic survival and ordered life in the ghetto for all inhabitants. For older Jews in particular, the emphasis on work often provoked self-
assessment. Older men and women had developed their roles in the community over
decades prior to the war. What were their roles in the ghetto? The strategy of “salvation
through work” linked a person’s existence to his or her productive potential. Work lent
purpose and provided sustenance to aged individuals and enabled older men and women
to aid the communal struggle for survival. Scarcity of sustainable employment
opportunities for the aged in ghetto industry should have provoked profound anxiety
among the older unemployed. In fact, the opposite was true. Elderly ghetto residents
without formal employment believed they too were viable members of the community.

The elderly in family life is the subject of Chapter Two. Over the course of the
aging process, the family provides an essential source of material and immaterial support.
In the ghetto German policies that ensured devastating hunger, rampant disease, and hard
labor translated into a comprehensive assault on this foundational structure of communal
life. Whereas work was primarily an individual endeavor for survival, strategies for
survival in the context of family life demanded collective responses based on the needs of
many individuals. In the Łódź ghetto families encountered increasing difficulty in
fulfilling the mutual obligations necessary for familial cohesion. In the case of aging
members, real and perceived exclusion from the family unit demanded the creation of
new forms of family.

Chapter Three looks beyond individual initiatives and close-knit networks of
support offered by the family to the broader community. During the first years of the
ghetto’s existence the Jewish Council in the Łódź ghetto implemented policies to
alleviate the suffering of the aged in need. Creation of a welfare program in September
1940 intended to ease the situation of the unemployed, including the aged. Two
community-run old age homes provided the most extensive care for aging Jews. Applicants for admission perceived the homes as a place of refuge from hunger, cold, family strife, and loneliness. In addition to being beneficiaries of communal support, older men and women helped to sustain the life of the community. Elderly ghetto inhabitants were vital participants in the organization and maintenance of cultural and religious activities in the public sphere. Aging healthcare workers confronted disease and the devastating hunger that affected everyone in the ghetto.

Beginning in October 1941, German policies in preparation for the murder of all Jews deported 20,000 Jews from Western Europe and consigned them to the Łódź ghetto. The majority of these exiles were elderly. The months between the arrival of the western Jews and their transport out to the killing center at Chełmno in May 1942 were marked by the intensification of German anti-Jewish policies that resulted in the increasing dissolution of the Łódź ghetto community.

Events of the Shpere Aktion of September 1942 serve as the chronological anchor of Chapter Four and mark the climactic end of the intertwined narratives presented in the dissertation. From 5-12 September German authorities targeted Jews under the age of ten and over the age of sixty-five for murder. During that week 16,500 Jews were torn from community institutions and family dwellings, contained in collections points, and loaded on trains bound for Chełmno. The Shpere was devastating for the entire ghetto community. No family was left untouched, and all were engulfed by grief over the death of loved ones. The vast majority of the oldest generation was killed overnight. The loss of the elderly and the very young transformed the ghetto. Along with the elderly inhabitants
of the ghetto the hallmarks of communal living died, and the collection of individuals left in the wake of this mass murder experienced the phenomenon of rapid collective aging.\textsuperscript{90} 

\textsuperscript{90} Discussing the effects of social exclusion on elderly Jews in Germany, Marian Kaplan wrote that, “social death can lead to physical death.” See Marion Kaplan, \textit{Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Daily Life in Nazi Germany} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 235. My argument that physical death (of the aged) can lead to social death (of the ghetto community) is both an extension and reversal of Kaplan’s claim.
CHAPTER 1:

WORK, EXISTENZBERECHTIGUNG, AND AGING IN THE GHETTO

1.1 Introduction

On 12 July 1942, residents living in the home for the aged at Gnieźnieńska 26 penned a letter to the Eldest of the Jews of Litzmannstadt. In it they described their desire to work and requested material assistance from the Chairman. A rug crafted by one of the female residents accompanied the letter as evidence of the signatories’ “affection and gratitude.” The gift was more than a mere token of loyalty and expression of thanks; it was a direct response to Rumkowski’s long-standing contention that only through work could the Jews of Łódź be saved from the violence perpetrated by German authorities. Rumkowski’s relentless campaign that championed the slogan “Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit!” hinged on the full employment of Jews living in the ghetto, including the aged, to maintain a level of productivity indispensable to German military and civilian demands. As the consecrated path to survival, work ordered daily activities and shaped the varied ways in which individuals responded to stresses associated with the scarcity, uncertainty, and fear that dominated life in the ghetto.

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91 The arrival of 20,000 Jews from locales in Germany, the former Austria, Luxembourg, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in October and November 1941 prompted Rumkowski to designate a second home for elderly Jews living in the ghetto.

By summer 1942 the connection between work and survival had become so enmeshed in the fabric of daily life that even those aging men and women who had long since abandoned the search for gainful employment sought to demonstrate their productivity to ghetto leaders. The elderly residents of Gnieźnieńska 26 insisted that the rug served as proof of the “willingness and ability” of older people to work. They spelled out their position:

The majority of our residents are still capable of performing a variety of crafts including and similar to these: knitting, darning, sewing, and the like. Our deepest wish and blessing would be the possibility, through

**WORK**

to prove our right to exist in the ghetto.

We appeal to your generosity, honorable Mr. Chairman, and ask:

Give us the opportunity, to provide the proof of our ABILITY TO WORK through action.

We are fully aware that only

**WORK**

— as your slogan proclaims — can offer the opportunity to alleviate our grave food situation. 93

The goal of the letter seemed clear. The aged men and women living at Gnieźnieńska 26 intended to persuade Rumkowski of their “right to exist”—their **Existenzberechtigung**—by offering the fruits of their labor. Dramatic emphasis on the words “work,” “action,” and “proof” suggested that these older men and women felt

93 Ibid., 231. (Emphasis in the original.)
compelled to prove their value to the community. Indeed the emphatic language and structure of this letter revealed the existential pressure felt by all ghetto inhabitants and the desperation of the aged in particular. At the same time, however, it obscured the complex and contradictory nature of work. In the Łódź ghetto, work was a source of protection but it also meant transformation and senescence—biological and physiological aging—for older Jews and the entire community.

For the Jewish community and individual members, work acted as a safeguard for survival at the most basic level. Beginning in April 1940 Rumkowski, touted his mantra “salvation through work” at every opportunity as he built an expansive network of ghetto workshops with the support of the German Ghetto Administration and Hans Biebow. Productivity potentials served as a powerful point of persuasion in German debates over plans regarding the maintenance or destruction of the Łódź ghetto. For the first two years of the ghetto period there existed a confluence of German objectives and responses. Employment opportunities created within the parameters of Rumkowski’s survival strategy provided individuals with access to food and shelter.

The community’s leadership had a vested interested in ensuring employment for the aged. Those who worked and could support themselves were less of a burden on families and the community as a whole. The elderly signatories to the July 1942 letter to Rumkowski emphasized their desire to work. However, it would be remiss to take these words solely at face value.

Regardless of intent, the elderly residents of Gnieźnieńska 26 desperately needed additional rations to improve their “tragic food situation.” In response to the

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community’s emphasis on production and increasing anxiety after the Germans removed tens of thousands of Jews from the ghetto in the first half of 1942, the residents of the home couched a basic request for food in rhetoric that acknowledged the connection between production and *Existenzberechtigung*.95

In addition to the protective aspects of work, the letter and gift from July 1942 revealed the transformative nature of work in the Łódź ghetto. Transformative work revealed moments of individual resilience and communal solidarity. The rhetoric of *Existenzberechtigung* was more than mere lip service to the communal campaign for survival. The rug was a product of time devoted and care taken for an activity that lent meaning and purpose to long days plagued by deprivation.

For the older woman who made the rug, living in the home at Gnieźnieńska 26 was at least a tacit admission that she could no longer provide for herself. Requesting and accepting aid from the community demanded that older charges forfeit what little independence they had retained until entry. A tactile project, like hooking the rug, allowed elderly workers to regain personal dignity and at the same time make a substantive contribution to the communal effort. The rug served as tangible evidence of productivity and as a source of great pride. It also demonstrated that work offered opportunities to adapt to the hardships of life in the ghetto.

The protective and transformative aspects of productivity were eventually overwhelmed by the senescent nature of work in the Łódź ghetto. Hard labor in the ghetto

95 For a related discussion on how Jews in Berlin learned the language necessary to present their cases against ethnic classification during the Third Reich see Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, *The Language of Nazi Genocide: Linguistic Violence and the Struggle of Germans of Jewish Ancestry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
was particularly taxing on aging bodies. Men and women came to live in the community’s old age homes because they could not perform the kind of activities necessary and therefore could not support themselves. From January to May 1942 German authorities sent 55,000 Jews from the Łódź ghetto to be murdered at Chelmno. The beginning stages of the “Final Solution” in the Łódź Ghetto served to reinforce the notion that only productive people would be permitted to stay in the ghetto.

Fear and anxiety prompted people into action. In spring and summer 1942 Rumkowski’s urgent calls to work were heeded by a growing number of people previously absent from the ghetto workforce. Less than two months after the letter from Gnieźnieńska 26 was written, the authors were most likely murdered on the first day of the Shpere Aktion. On 5 September 1942 Jewish police rounded up the residents of both homes for the aged and took them to collection points where they awaited trains to the death camp at Chelmno. The letter of July 1942 revealed a group of older Jews operating under the impression that circumstances were unchanged, that production was the key to survival. Unaware of the events that lay ahead, they requested extra foodstuffs to bolster their chances of survival by utilizing the language of rescue through work.

This examination of elderly participation in and reactions to the strategy of “survival through work” draws on three lines of scholarly inquiry. First, I challenge the tendency of scholars to evaluate the experiences of older men and women in the context of work through the prism of their deaths. Scholarship to date has noted briefly and only in very general terms the precarious situation of the aged living in ghettos under German occupation. These assessments are problematic in that they implicitly apply the rubric of National Socialist ideology that classified Jews in the ghettos as either “useful” or
“useless.” 96 Those categories found expression in Rumkowski’s plan for survival in the Łódź ghetto. Such interpretations deny agency to the aged and presuppose intense insecurity on their behalf vis-à-vis the “survival through work” strategy. 97

By analyzing the kind of work older people performed in the ghetto and the ways in which they utilized the rhetoric of “survival through work” to their advantage, this chapter aims to extricate the actions and reactions of elderly men and women from retrospective interpretations. Aged Jews in the Łódź ghetto roundly rejected the idea that they fell into a broad category of “useless” individuals as defined by German authorities and institutionalized by Rumkowski’s administration.

Second, this analysis of the relationship between work and senescence draws on scholarly discussions of continuity and disruption in social structures in the ghettos of German-occupied Europe. Scholarship on the unsettling effects of ghetto life on pre-existing social hierarchies highlights the disruptive nature of German persecution in the ghettos. 98 Analyses of social organization in the ghettos lend texture to the daily life of Jews living in extremis and shed light on myriad ways in which captive Jewish societies

96 See Trunk, Lodz Ghetto, 304. Trunk ascribed the particular plight of the elderly to their inability to adapt to an environment in which “only the working Jew had the right to exist.” See also Corni, Hitler’s Ghettos, 246–247.

97 For example see Horwitz, Ghettostadt. Horwitz argued that the elderly residents were “especially at risk” and that their letter was a “woeful” and “desperate” attempt to prove that they were useful members of the community. Ibid., 200–201.

attempted to thwart the destructive efforts for their German oppressors. 99

My analysis of the manner in which older men and women navigated a society ruled by the implications of “rescue through work” attests to the survival of prewar social constructs and reveals the pre-existing cleavages that were exacerbated by internal conditions. Work of all kinds provided a mode for older men and women to establish important continuities with prewar social identities and structures and at the same time navigate the challenges they faced when familiar social norms were upended in the ghetto.

Third, the following analysis of elderly responses to a specific social context draws from theories of social gerontology and identity formation among the aged. Social theories of aging suggest that older men and women renegotiate their roles in society in response to power shifts and declining physical health. As people age they renegotiate their roles in work, family, and society, drawing on internal and external structures for support. 100 Theories of aging rely on multidisciplinary approaches to understanding the

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construction of personal identity in old age.  

Experience of disaster in old age becomes a point of reference for integrating past experiences into self-understanding and personal narrative in old age. In the specific context of the Łódź ghetto these theories are helpful in understanding the fundamental importance of shaping the experiences and self-perception of the aged.

In order to understand the defining role of work for older Jews, this chapter discusses Rumkowski’s strategy of survival for the Łódź ghetto. One section explores the intimate connection between elderly identities and work and shows how German and Jewish policies reinforced that connection. Older Jews approached their new reality in the ghetto within a framework of decades of accumulated work experience. The experiences and familiar associations rooted in the prewar era shaped the immediate reactions of the elderly to the philosophy for survival adopted in the ghetto. The repeated notion that work would save the Jews of Łódź from annihilation was neither simple nor straightforward in its practical application. For aging men and women work could be

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protective, transformative, and senescent. From 1940 through 1942 the multifaceted nature of work had similar effects on the ghetto community as a whole.

1.2 “Salvation through Work”: The Development of Rumkowski’s Strategy for Survival

Rumkowski’s development of a survival strategy for the ghetto via the creation of an indispensable Jewish labor force was contingent on German support. As early as April 1940, before the Łódź ghetto was shuttered from the rest of the city, Rumkowski approached the head of the German Ghetto Administration Hans Biebow and Łódź City Mayor Karol Marder with plans for creating a highly centralized industrial economy in the ghetto. Initially Rumkowski intended ghetto production to pay for basic necessities for the community. That same month German authorities authorized Rumkowski to organize Jewish labor in the ghetto.¹⁰³ Rumkowski’s success in creating the infrastructure necessary to harness the production potential of the ghetto population and provide products to meet German military and civilian needs allowed for the Chairman to expand his limited objectives.

The reasoning behind German support for Rumkowski’s desire to expand ghetto industry was threefold. First, in the short term Jewish labor offset the costs of providing meager foodstuffs to the community. Second, productivity levels in the Łódź ghetto promised considerable wealth and material support for the German Reich. Third, contrary to Rumkowski’s slogan “survival through work,” German authorities approved plans for

¹⁰³ Browning and Matthäus, Origins of the Final Solution, 155. According to Browning the German authorities did not accept existence of the ghetto for the long term and Rumkowski’s vision of “sustaining ghetto life through production” until October 1940. Between April and October, Greiser operated under his stated objective of making Łódź a city free of Jews. Greiser maintained singular focus on extracting wealth from the ghetto while awaiting approval to transport the Jews of Łódź to the Generalgouvernement.
slave labor because it hastened the destruction of Jewish lives and the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{104}

In the ghetto work ultimately accelerated the process of aging on an individual and collective level. Acting within the framework of the ruse that work meant survival, Rumkowski relied on resources and skills that the Jews of Łódź brought into the ghetto to build the ghetto industry from the ground up. By the end of May 1940, Rumkowski informed Marder of his progress on the economic front: over 18,000 workers were registered and ready to manufacture seventy different products.\textsuperscript{105} The number of workers employed in that first month of Rumkowski’s economic plan was relatively small in relation to the ghetto population of 164,000 and not nearly large enough to support the needs of the Jews living within the ghetto boundaries at the time. Yet the employment of 18,000 workers in a matter of weeks reflected Rumkowski’s principled


\textsuperscript{105} For more details about the correspondence between Rumkowski, Marder, and Biebow and an analysis of the German position on Jewish labor and the longevity of the Łódź ghetto, see Browning and Matthäus, \textit{Origins of the Final Solution}, 153–155; Trunk, \textit{Lodz Ghetto}, 148.
commitment to production as a means for Jewish survival.\textsuperscript{106}

Steps toward the development of industrial production in the ghetto beginning in spring 1940 indicated the zeal with which Rumkowski pursued the strategy of survival through work and disclosed the ways in which Rumkowski’s strategy would come to shape all aspects of life in the ghetto up to its destruction in August 1944. On the one hand, the policies and decisions implemented under the guise of “rescue through work” reflected Rumkowski’s logical, if flawed, understanding of the interplay between National Socialist ideology and the policies of the German occupation authorities. Jews incarcerated in the ghetto were evaluated based on their ability to work; they were either \textit{Arbeitsfähig} or \textit{Arbeitsunfähig}.\textsuperscript{107} German authorities created for Rumkowski a false sense of security by leading him to believe that there existed a rational schema that ruled German policies dealing with Jews. The suggestion was that productive Jews would be allowed to live.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{106} See Gutman, introduction to Trunk, \textit{Lodz Ghetto}, xli. Isaiah Gutman offered a brief overview of the rapid expansion of ghetto industry: “The Łódź Ghetto excelled in the organization of its labor and its achievements in production. The production system in the ghetto, set in motion immediately after the ghetto was established, quickly expanded until the enclosure became in Trunk’s words, ‘a milder version of a labor camp.’ The first sewing shop went into operation in May 1940, and by September 1940 there were seventeen \textit{ressorts} including seven sewing factories. By 1943, there were 117 operational factories, workshops, sorting houses, and merchandise warehouses in the ghetto. By July 1940, 40,000 of the 146,000 Jews in the ghetto were employed in the \textit{ressorts} and offices, and by March 1942, the number of production workers alone had risen to 53,000.” See also Rumkowski’s production stats in a speech he gave to ghetto official on 1 February 1941, Sascha Riecke Feuchert and Erwin Leibfried, eds., \textit{Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt, 1941}, vol. 1, Schriftenreihe zur Łódzer Getto-Chronik; (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 55.

\textsuperscript{107} On German discussion, definitions, and practical implementations of these terms see Corni, \textit{Hitler’s Ghettos}, 228.

Responding logically, Rumkowski emphasized the necessity of productivity as a means for survival as individuals and as a community.\(^{109}\) On the surface, Rumkowski’s adoption of the distinction between productive and non-productive elements of society had deadly implications for aging Jews in the ghetto. Implementation of the “survival through work” plan demanded productivity from ghetto inhabitants of all ages. Elderly men and women responded to the demand in various ways.

At the same time, policies implemented by the Jewish leadership in Łódź attempted to blur the lines between those deemed “fit” and “unfit” for work with the expressed purpose of saving Łódź Jewry. Rumkowski’s plan envisioned a bifurcated workforce. The young and able-bodied would work in the rapidly expanding ghetto industry. Everyone else would “support themselves by supplying services to the ghetto.”\(^{110}\) In this schema of full employment everyone in the ghetto could be considered arbeitsfähig. The goal of total employment was manifest in a range of policies that aimed to persuade unemployed segments of the population to join the work force. Rumkowski articulated his vision to senior ghetto officials on 1 February 1941. He began his speech with these words:

* A majority of the propertied classes left the ghetto before it was sealed. Left behind were: the middle classes, the poor and the working classes, who to large extent constituted the proverbial Baluty element. […] I have set myself the goal of bringing order to the public at all costs. Primarily this goal can be achieved by

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\(^{110}\) Jakub Poznański, “Łódź Ghetto Diary,” University of Vienna, Freund-Perz Collection, 5f qtd. in Corni, *Hitler’s Ghettos*, 238n122.
general employment. Therefore my motto is: Provide work for as many people as possible.\textsuperscript{111}

In 1941, Rumkowski initiated a policy that required social welfare recipients to perform fifteen days of labor per month in order to receive promised monetary aid. Yet even these policies could not overcome the reality that many working-age Jews, older men and women in particular, could not perform the tasks that ghetto industry demanded. In a speech to administrators, factory managers, and advisors on 2 March 1942, Rumkowski lamented the refusal of some ghetto inhabitants to abide by his strategy for survival.\textsuperscript{112}

[...] Just last year I made jobs for all ghetto inhabitants top priority. I therefore order a fifteen-day work assignment for those receiving welfare. You may remember that I stressed the importance of satisfying this requirement. Experience has made clear that the basic law of our time is: “Work protects from annihilation.” Unfortunately, there were Jews in the ghetto who laughed at this idea, preferring to evade their work obligation by manipulating the welfare system.

In the fall I reduced rations to force the shirkers receiving them to give them up and enter into productive work. But even this didn’t help, since those with big families felt it was still to their advantage to remain on relief. And there were other instances of people staying away from work, for one reason or another. I tried other incentives, all in order to ensure peace and a secure tomorrow. Peace of mind is more essential than food. Had my

\textsuperscript{111} For more details about the event and the speech see Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1941}, 1:54–60.

\textsuperscript{112} The daily chronicle recorded a transcript of the March 1942 speech and offered some context. According to the report, the speech came amid the atmosphere of unrest that arose in response to transports of 15,000 Jews out of the ghetto in the second half of February 1942. From the auditorium stage at the House of Culture, the Chairman gave his speech to an invited audience of 500 ghetto leaders and dignitaries. See Sascha Riecke Feuchert and Erwin Leibfried, eds., \textit{Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt, 1942}, vol. 2, Schriftenreihe zur Lódźer Getto-Chronik; (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 85–88.
words been given their full due by a wide segment of the population, you and I would have it much easier now.113

Rumkowski interpreted the actions of such “shirkers” as a personal affront to his survival strategy for the community. Unemployed elderly were included in this group of “shirkers.”

At the House of Culture that night in March 1942, Rumkowski outlined a plan to reach 90 percent employment in the ghetto. Rumkowski’s call to action was made more urgent by recent events. In January 1942 German authorities had begun removing Jews from the ghetto and sending them to Chełmno to be killed. After a brief hiatus from 30 January through 21 February, transports recommenced on 22 February and continued daily through early April 1942. During this first phase of systematic murder in Łódź, the Germans killed nearly 45,000 Jews. In this atmosphere of fear and anxiety, Rumkowski proposed a plan to ensure more work for ghetto residents. More shifts, shorter workdays and jobs for even the most menial tasks offered employment opportunities for those Jews still without work, older men and women in particular. More importantly, securing a job in March 1942 protected the aged from transport out of the ghetto.

In the speech itself, explicit mention of the elderly and their place in the workforce suggested that Rumkowski held contradictory ideas about the relationship between older Jews and work. Older men and women were, no doubt, among the “shirkers” and “manipulators” of the welfare system that the ghetto leader railed against. However, his characterization of the unemployed refused to recognize the difficulties of

113 A report on the speech can be found in the YIVO archives. See YIVO, RG 241, Folder 928. I have used the English translation of Rumkowski’s speech in a published collection edited by Michael Berenbaum. See Michael Berenbaum, Witness to the Holocaust (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 81.
the aged in finding and maintaining employment. Rumkowski did concede that some older Jews were unable to work: “As far as older people are concerned, working people’s parents who are unable to work, I trust that God will not forsake them.”\textsuperscript{114} That statement was a tacit acknowledgment of the protections afforded to working people’s family members. In the same breath, however, Rumkowski washed his hands of any personal responsibility for the “parents who are unable to work” by leaving their fate up to God.

Elderly Jews for the most part were not exempt from Rumkowski’s demand for full employment. He urged everyone to participate:

\begin{quote}
I have no doubt that I can achieve this greatly desired goal if the whole ghetto unanimously, in closed ranks, reports to work. Don’t be ashamed if many of you have to take jobs which aren’t exactly prestigious, jobs which are to be performed in public. Especially you, my sisters who are getting on in years, remember that even if you’re sent to sweep the street or to cart refuse, it’s only for your own good.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

Rumkowski’s speech outlined a cohesive communal vision that privileged work. Ghetto residents who conformed to and supported Rumkowski’s paternalistic vision reaped the benefits of communal support and evaded death in the short term.

Rumkowski’s “rescue through work” strategy in general and the specific initiatives that expanded categories of \textit{arbeitsfähig}, created opportunities for older men and women to develop individual strategies for survival. Some, particularly well-connected men, secured positions in the work force from the outset. The vast majority struggled to (re)define their roles within the community. The aged performed essential duties in the ghetto that contributed to the solidarity and wellbeing of the community. For

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto, work, in all of its iterations and contexts, constituted the core of personal identity, shaped the contours of interpersonal relationships, and determined an individual’s chances of survival through 1942.

1.3 Work as an Expression of Self-Understanding among Aging Ghetto Inhabitants

By way of age alone, older Jews formulated distinct responses to the mantra “survival through work” and its implications. Elderly Jews confined to the ghetto had already accumulated lifetimes of work in the public and private spheres. Many, if not most, had a well-defined sense of work and the role it played in their own self-understanding based on decades of daily activities associated with work. The work these men and women performed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped who they were, the families they nurtured, and the opportunities they enjoyed.116

The degree to which older Jews still performed duties associated with their work varied widely—some had long since retreated from the workplace, some were reaching the pinnacle of their professional lives, and still others occupied some status in between the extremes. Nevertheless work was a defining experience for the men and women approaching 60 years of age. For the first two years of the ghetto period in Łódź, work was a primary lens of self-assessment and self-presentation.

German-initiated registration of the Jewish population reinforced the connection between occupation and identity. In accordance with German orders, the Łódź Jewish Administration conducted a census of the ghetto population on 16 June 1940. The census reported 160,423 persons living in the ghetto. On 12 July 1940 the Records Department of the Jewish Council finalized a population study that offered a cursory glimpse at the occupational composition of Łódź Jewry according to age and gender. The Records Department used this census information in conjunction with compulsory registration information to generate the report.

At the outset of the German occupation and the imposition of forced labor, all Jews of working age were required to register. Compulsory registration was expanded to include all age groups after the ghetto was sealed in April 1940. In response, 12,909 men and women over sixty years old reported their basic biographical information including occupation. Nearly all of the 5,602 men in this age group identified some form of employment. The report did not reveal the nature of their employment, and whether or not these men were all actively employed was not easy to determine. Yet 99 percent of

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117 Rumkowski, Announcement no. 60, 12 June 1940; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241; Folder 191; YIVO. This announcement issued by Rumkowski ordered all ghetto residents to remain in their homes on the day of the census.

118 Records Department [later renamed Department of Statistics], “Die Bevölkerung am 12. Juli 1940 nach Beruf, Geschlecht u. Alter (laut Meldungen)” 12 July 1940; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241; Folder 800; YIVO.

119 Only 55 of the men in this age group (less than one percent) were recorded as “without occupation.”
these men identified with an occupation.\textsuperscript{120}

In contrast, although not surprising, only 10 percent of women in the corresponding age group identified an occupation.\textsuperscript{121} Of course the remaining 90 percent of aging women were not idle. The gender discrepancy reflected a rigid division of labor between the men and women in this generation. “Occupation” implied the duties a person performed in the public sphere for compensation. The traditional work of women in this age group was performed in the private sphere and generally without compensation. Yet work they did.

Of the 6,309 older men and women who claimed an occupation, more than one-third reported themselves to be \textit{Kaufleute}.\textsuperscript{122} The 1,876 older “merchants” accounted for nearly a quarter of all the men in this occupation at the time of registration. Men in their sixties and older reported a wide variety of occupations, representative of the working population at large. Aging men registered as teachers, weavers, tailors, and shoemakers.

\textsuperscript{120} See Marcus, \textit{Social and Political History}. In his 1983 study of the economic, social, and political composition of interwar Polish Jewry, Joseph Marcus’ explanation of occupational categories used in the 1931 census of Jews in Poland could be helpful in understanding why so few aging men identified themselves as unemployed. Citing the document series \textit{Statystyka Polska} published in Warsaw in 1939, Marcus wrote: “Occupationally passive people were defined as ‘all persons who for their livelihood depend mainly on support by their families.’ All others were occupationally active. It can immediately be noticed that this social group included all sorts of people who were not active at all, viz., pensioners, vagrants, all hospitalized patients, and what was by far most important, the large mass of unemployed.” See Ibid., 32n8.

\textsuperscript{121} Out of 7,307 women over the age of sixty only 762 reported an occupation at the time of the report.

\textsuperscript{122} In addition to 1,876 men, 287 women over the age of sixty reported themselves as \textit{Kaufleute}. This occupation was by far the most populous category among this age cohort. In an article from 1953, Celia Stopnicka Rosenthal examined the factors responsible for social stratification within the prewar Jewish community in Stoczek, a small community in central Poland. Rosenthal estimated that approximately one-third of Jewish men were businessmen or merchants, which she indicated as a wide-reaching category “from small storekeepers to owners of forests and mills.” See Celia Stopnicka Rosenthal, “Social Stratification of the Jewish Community in a Small Polish Town,” \textit{American Journal of Sociology} 59, no. 1 (July 1, 1953): 2.
They identified as both skilled and unskilled workers, as professionals and managers. They worked in healthcare as physicians, dentists, and pharmacists.\(^{123}\)

Each of the occupations reported within this age cohort of men represented years, decades, even lifetimes of work. The work of these men helped to support family members, served the wider Jewish community, and lent purpose and meaning to their own lives. The number of years dedicated to work and the very nature of work—preparatory education and training, daily activities, risks taken, opportunities won and lost—solidified the intimate connection between what one does and who one is. For older men in particular, registering in the ghetto was more than the simple act of reporting one’s name and occupation. Registration was an act of affirming identity, an important act in this climate of uncertainty.

Declaring an occupation during registration did not ensure access to employment in the ghetto. Although Rumkowski’s emphasis on production was clear from the beginning, the infrastructure necessary to bring that vision to fruition had to be created from the ground up. On 1 May 1940 the first tailor shop began operations with

\(^{123}\) That thirty-three percent reported to be “merchants” by occupation corresponded with the most recent census data for the Jewish population in Poland. Data from the 1931 census was published as Statystyka Polska in Warsaw in 1939. The 1931 census has been the focus of a number of scholarly studies. Jewish historian and sociologist Yakov Lestschinsky published his analyses as early as the 1930s. See Yakov Lestschinsky, *Di Ekonomishe Lage fun Yidn in Poyln* (Berlin: [s.n.], 1932). Joseph Marcus relied on the 1931 census and Lestschinsky’s work among other primary sources to weave together the complex social, economic, and political tapestry that defined interwar Jewish life in Poland. Marcus’ analysis included an overview of the origins of that particular social structure in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the period in which the subjects of my study came of age. See Marcus, *Social and Political History*. In the sixth volume of the journal *Polin*, a number of scholars analyzed factors influential in shaping the specific social structure of Łódź Jewry during this period. Of particular interest in this context is Jerzy Tomaszewski’s presentation and analysis of the 1931 census, in which the author attempted to “consider some questions ignored by him [Yakov Lestschinsky].” See Jerzy Tomaszewski, “Jews in Łódź in 1931 According to Statistics,” *Polin* 6 (1991): 173–200.
approximately 300 workers.\textsuperscript{124} With the promise of work Rumkowski ordered all tailors in the ghetto to register themselves along with any tools they owned.\textsuperscript{125} One workshop could not begin to fulfill the employment needs of 14,984 registered tailors, including 566 men and women over 60, living in the ghetto.

At 85 years of age, Icek Invert was just one of many unemployed tailors. In a petition addressed to Rumkowski in December 1941, Mr. Invert described the meaning of his prewar work. “I had, until the war, regularly worked as a tailor; I needed nothing from anyone, because I supported myself through hard, honest work.”\textsuperscript{126} Like so many others, Invert’s work provided for his material needs. Even more important, his “hard, honest work” ensured his independence. As a person of gainful employment, Mr. Invert took care of himself into his eighties. By December 1941, his situation had deteriorated dramatically. Failing eyesight prevented him from utilizing his skills as a tailor in one of the growing number of ghetto Ressorts. He lived with six other people in a “tiny room,” in which he was relegated to a corner that was “cold and damp.” Without employment, the aged man had no means to procure food.\textsuperscript{127} For the elderly, like Mr. Invert, lack of employment was a multifaceted assault. Without work one could not secure the material

\textsuperscript{124} \textsuperscript{} The daily chronicle described the origins of the tailor workshops in an entry on 24 December 1942, entitled “Anniversary Celebration of the Workshops.” See Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1942}, 2:609–610.

\textsuperscript{125} Rumkowski, Announcement No. 29, 2 May 1940; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241; Folder 175; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

\textsuperscript{126} Icek Invert to Rumkowski, Petition, 28 December 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 125.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
means necessary for survival. At the same time, unemployment represented a loss of identity for older Jews.

For elderly men especially, “occupation” was fundamental to self-understanding and shaped responses to the hardships they encountered in the ghetto. Between July 1940 and September 1942 more than 500 elderly men and women wrote petitions to Rumkowski seeking material support to alleviate the hunger, cold, and personal loss they encountered in the ghetto. Beyond the explicit desired outlined by each elderly petitioner, the letters served as an exercise in self-presentation.

Among male petitioners work occupied a central position in these succinct personal narratives. In November 1940, sixty-six year-old Gecel Jerozelimski began his plea to Rumkowski with the information that he had worked for the A. Pioskowska Firm for forty “uninterrupted” years, until the end of 1939. Implicit in the few lines of text was the arc and ultimate demise of one man’s career. Leon Solc offered a more detailed account of the personal investment that underpinned his successes as an engineer. Mr. Solc included a “curriculum vitae” in his January 1941 petition. The 67-year-old man highlighted the educational and experiential training that laid the foundation for a successful engineering career.

After completing a degree in engineering at the St. Petersburg Institute of Technology, Solc worked on the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Harbin,

128 Gecel Jerozelimski to Rumkowski, Petition, 24 November 1940. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 726.

China and as chief engineer at a refinery in the oil-rich city of Baku. He returned to Poland in the interwar period where he took a position as “chief director” of the “Sair” Firm in Warsaw and later as an officer at the Depository Bank of Łódź. Solc’s petition revealed little else about the details of his life. The aging man made no reference to family members or any other sources of support that he could draw upon to alleviate his “tragic situation” in January 1941. This man’s work—his achievements, travels, and prominence—molded his self-identity. Forty years of work as a merchant in Łódź occupied the primary position in Stanislaw Szymanski’s petition in March 1941, as well as in the April 1941 petition submitted by the 71-year-old Ayzik Voldman.

Elderly female petitioners were less likely to feature past work experiences in their petitions. Women, no doubt, recognized the hierarchy of work that emerged in the ghetto. Rumkowski’s strategy for survival privileged a narrow definition of work focused on production, one that did not encompass the kinds of work that shaped the lives and identities of older women.

When women of this age group had relevant work experience, it appeared in their personal narratives in a manner similar to those of their male counterparts. In her petition

130 Harbin, a town in Northeastern China, was founded in 1898 by a Polish engineer Adam Szydłowski during the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The town was located at a critical point of the railway line that linked Siberia to the eastern port of Vladivostok via Manchuria, a more direct alternative to the Trans-Siberian Railway. Baku, the present-day capital of Azerbaijan, was part of the Russian Empire when it experienced an oil boom in the late nineteenth century. Russian authorities sold land to private investors for oil exploration beginning in 1872. For context see the introduction in A Chronicle of the Civil War in Siberia and Exile in China: The Diaries of Petr Vasil’evich Vologodskii, 1918-1925, eds. Semion Lyandres and Dietmar Wulff (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

131 Stanislaw Szymanski to Rumkowski, Petition, 4 March 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 655-656.

from January 1942, sixty-two year-old Olga Pomeranc described her work as a schoolteacher, a position that she occupied for twenty-four years before the war, and lamented her inability to find work in the ghetto.\footnote{Olga Pomeranc to Rumkowski, Petition, 14 January 1942. USHMM RG-15.083M, Reel 90, 169.} In two petitions submitted to Rumkowski in September 1941, seventy year-old Helena Lipschitz mentioned that she worked as a music teacher for twenty years in Łódź. Mrs. Lipschitz touched on her own work only briefly, choosing instead to feature the work of her “esteemed” husband. Mr. Lipschitz, who died the year before and had been the longtime secretary and co-founder of the “Voyagers Club.”\footnote{Helena Lipschitz to Rumkowski, Petition, 14 September 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 289-290; Lipschitz to Rumkowski, Petition, 29 September 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 411-412.}

Rumkowski’s “salvation through work” created an environment in the Łódź ghetto in which “work” became a lens through which ghetto inhabitants, in particular the elderly among them, developed their own survival strategies and defined their self-identity. Older men and women presented their prewar activities as roles that should be valued by the community despite the emphasis on production in the ghetto. Presentation of past work became a way of claiming membership in the ghetto community.

The inherent connection between work and life forced older Jews to reassess their roles in the community. Elderly petitioners who emphasized their work in letters to the Jewish leadership sought a deeper level of comprehension about their current situation by trying to find threads of continuity between their past experiences and the circumstances in which they lived in the ghetto. Foregrounding their occupational history allowed them to present a version of themselves that fit into the current social context. A petition was
an exercise in negotiating new identities by drawing on characteristics and activities that defined life before the ghetto and reacting to a new social context that privileged production.

1.4 Work as Protection for the Aged

For aging Jews in the ghetto work within the parameters of the community’s “salvation through labor” strategy fortified them against daily struggles. Impoverished, dislocated, and hungry, older Jews, just like their younger counterparts were eager to find work. Rumkowski exploited this vulnerability by tying food rations to employment. Upon opening the first workshops in May 1940, Rumkowski called for the registration of all tailors and carpenters with the promise of wages and food. Scarcity of jobs, particularly during the first year of the ghetto’s existence, coupled with physical decline in old age hindered access to food for the elderly.

Rumkowski’s plan to create an industrial complex that wielded the productive power of all ghetto inhabitants expanded opportunities for work among aging Jews. By the end of 1943 there were 101 active workshops and factories in the Łódź ghetto that employed 73,782 people, nearly 85 percent of the ghetto population at the time. Near full employment in the ghetto was only possible after the “unproductive elements” of the population, including most of the men and women over the age of 60, had been expelled from the ghetto and murdered at Chelmno in 1942. But before German authorities ordered the murder of thousands of Jews from Łódź, elderly Jews did work. Rubin Pomerance spent the prewar years working as a wooden shoe craftsman and selling his
goods at the Leonhardt Market in the heart of industrial Łódź. In a petition from April 1942, the 74-year-old man boasted accomplishments stating that he had been a “supervisor” in the market square before the war in addition to an active philanthropist in the Jewish community.

The setting of Mr. Pomeranc’s prewar work was exemplary of a significant sector of the working Jewish population in the interwar period. Economic crisis in the early 1930s resulted in an increase in “home workers,” like Rubin Pomeranc, who did contract work for larger manufactures out of their homes. Mr. Pomeranc continued working from his flat in the ghetto where he made wooden shoes.

By 1941 thousands of Jews in the Łódź ghetto contributed to production by working from their living quarters. “Homeworkers,” the majority of whom were women, delivered their goods to workshops on a regular basis and were compensated as other workers with daily soup and wages. Continuity of work experience must have provided the elderly Mr. Pomeranc with an enviable amount of stability. For the duration of his work he could continue performing a craft that he had spent his life perfecting. He also received the wages and food necessary to survive.

Leonhardt Market (currently Niepodległości Square) opened in 1902 as part of a plan to move trade from the Upper Market (at the northern end of Piotrkowska Street) to a larger location at the southern border of the city. At the time, the textile firm Leonhardt, Woelker, and Girdhardt occupied the square. The market was named for one of the firm’s owners Ernst Leonhardt (b. 1840, Saxony – d. 1917, Łódź), a successful German industrialist who had settled in Łódź in 1877.

Rubin Pomeranc to Rumkowski, Petition, 19 April 1942. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 39. Pomerants wrote his petition to Rumkowski in German but used the Polish word “kierownik” to describe his position in the market place.

See Marcus, Social and Political History.
Between 1940 and 1942 manufacturing in the ghetto underwent an intense process akin to industrialization. Rumkowski’s policies abandoned the model exemplified by Rubin Pomeranc and promoted the routinization and mechanization of the workforce. These changes allowed the ghetto to fulfill more German orders and enabled the employment of sectors of the population previously considered to be Arbeitsunfähig, including the elderly. In the ghetto large factories that utilized an assembly-line method of production replaced the smaller-scale production of artisans and craftsmen that had dominated the prewar economy in Łódź. 138

Assembly lines created more opportunities for older ghetto inhabitants, especially women, to find work and thus secure vital food rations. Szajndla Klajnert arrived in the ghetto with her husband, daughter, and granddaughter in May 1942 after being expelled from the Pabianice ghetto just southwest of Łódź. The elderly woman found work in one of the factories that employed older people. In a postwar memoir, Rita Hilton recalled the essential nature of work and the kind of work her grandmother performed:

[…][I]n order to get an extra ration of the soup of a day, you had to work. Also you had to work in order to get paid. [...] In order to buy rations, which were coming out every two weeks one had to pay with the ghetto money and in order to have the ghetto money one had to work.

The Germans set up a whole series of factories in the ghetto where the whole population worked. Everybody worked. We had coat factories, hat factories, and we made brooms. There were even factories where they employed little children and old ladies. My grandmother worked in one of them. They all took discarded rags from all the stuff that was unsalvageable and dyed it different colors. Some of it was pieces cut from various factories when they were cutting out fabrics for aprons or coats. All those little rags had to be tied and made into balls of thin strips of fabrics

according to the color. There were also ladies who hooked the rugs from them and the rugs were being sent to Germany. Poor grandma had to work at the long table with other little old ladies who couldn't do anything else. The tables had mesh underneath them so all the dirt from those fabrics would fly out of it. That stuff was filthy. They had to sort and keep tying. Very often the stuff was so infested with lice that when poor grandma would come home, she had lice on her feet because the lice would fall down on her clothing through the mesh under the table. So late in the winter night we would sit home and try to find lice in our clothes.139

Rita Hilton’s recollections underscored the paradoxical nature of work for aging Jews in the Łódź ghetto. On the one hand, work had a protective function and was essential in order to obtain the sustenance necessary to keep the body alive. On the other hand, work conditions threatened a person’s life. Hard labor, long hours, and exposure to disease could accelerate the aging process and bring one closer to death.

The premise of Rumkowski’s survival strategy was the idea that production would extend the longevity of the ghetto and the lives of those living within its walls. For most elderly the reality was not so simple. Enticed by the promise of increased rations and much-needed monetary compensation older men and women sought and found jobs in the expansive networks of ghetto workshops. But work conditions preyed on the physical frailties of aging bodies. As a result, few older men and women were able to sustain employment and receive the benefits associated with work for extended periods of time.

In addition to the importance of material benefits, the approach of older Jews to work in the Łódź ghetto revealed the importance of relationships in their strategies for survival. Protekcja [Polish, “protection”] and pleyzes [Yiddish, “shoulders”] described

the benefit of developing and maintaining relationships with influential people in the ghetto. The Ghetto Encyclopedia described the role of “protekcja” in the ghetto as follows:

Connections in the ghetto, that make it possible to obtain normal support in simplified ways (e.g., services out of order), or even additional support. In the ghetto one used connections of this kind at every turn and in every matter; over time this would become the foundation for existence in the ghetto.140

Older men and women drew support from longstanding relationships to help secure work. Most important was finding the “right” kind of employment. Employment in the Jewish Administration offered the benefits of extra rations and better compensation. Office work was less physically taxing. Positions in the bureaucracy also offered some chance at building new relationships with influential people.

Drawing from a network of long-time friends and acquaintances, Rumkowski built a sprawling bureaucracy of departments and offices to support the “survival through work” strategy. In February 1941 Rumkowski announced that his “departments, institutions, and businesses” employed 5,500 people.141 The number of administration employees grew to 12,880 by August 1942.142 Ghetto inhabitants of all ages staffed the offices of the departments on Bałuter Ring. The aging men and women who secured administrative and managerial positions in Rumkowski’s bureaucracy reaped the benefits of avoiding tedious, more taxing labor assignments and, in some cases, the promise of protection.


141 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1941, 1:55.

142 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:399.
Development and management of ghetto industries required a group of people willing to help implement Rumkowski’s vision of an indispensable workforce. With decades of business training and industry expertise, some older men were able to parlay prewar work experience into positions of relative security in the ghetto. Mauryce Goldblum (b. 4 October 1882) took a position in the ghetto bureaucracy as director of the finance and business department after directing the Marcus Kohn Textile Firm for many years in prewar Łódź. Goldblum’s prewar business experience and prominence in the community made him a well-suited candidate for his initial position. He retained a coveted office job even when his position changed. In March 1942, Goldblum was appointed director of the Ghetto Post Office. Between 1 August 1942 and 25 September 1942, Abram Jakub Dawidowicz took over as director of the Post Office while Goldblum was sick. Despite his age (nearly 60 at the time) and his illness at the time of the Shpere Aktion in September 1942, Mauryce Goldblum avoided being included in the transports that ended in the murder of many in his age cohort.

Leadership positions in the ghetto economy provided some older men with protections unavailable to their counterparts. Prewar factory owners and industrialists continued similar work as directors of ghetto workshops. Rumkowski appointed Hersz Litwin (b. 24 December 1874), a prominent prewar industrialist in Łódź, to the six-member Central Committee for Industry and Work in April 1941. As a member of the Committee, Litwin played an advisory role to Rumkowski. The Committee’s objective

143 Marcus Kohn built his business empire on several wool factories in the 1880s.

was to help with the expansion of ghetto industry and increase the working population in the ghetto.\footnote{Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1941}, 1:125, 386.}

Continuity of work afforded stability in self-understanding and bolstered chances of survival for older men who could draw on prewar occupational experience. Jakob Plockier, born in Służew on 18 May 1876, opened and operated a successful chemical factory in Łódź before the war. In the ghetto he took on the role of director of a rubber coats factory.\footnote{Andrzej Kempa and Marek Szukalak, \textit{The Biographical Dictionary of the Jews from Łódź} (Łódź: Oficyna Bibliofilów, 2006), 197. Plockier died in the ghetto on 25 March 1941.} Samuel Jakub Toplinski (b. 17 November 1878) moved to Łódź before the war and made his name as a prominent industrialist. In the ghetto, Toplinski was named director of one of the tanneries, a position he held throughout the ghetto period.\footnote{Sascha. Riecke Feuchert and Erwin Leibfried, eds., \textit{Die Chronik des Gettos Łódź/Litzmannstadt, 1943}, vol. 3 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 453.} A master carpenter before the war, Mojsze Dawid Herszkowicz (b. 28 July 1880) became the director of the carpentry workshop at Pucka 9 in the ghetto.\footnote{Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1941}, 1:80, 90, 373. Herszkowicz died in the ghetto on 17 August 1942.}

Some older men took positions in ghetto industry and administration that departed from their previous experience. Such positions provided new opportunities to wield power and influence in the community. Moshe Kalman Mokrski (b. 1879/1880) worked as a salesman and bookkeeper before the war and became director of the Electricity Department in the Łódź ghetto.\footnote{Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1943}, 3:97.} A number of elderly men managed carpentry workshops, including Isak Lentscher (b. 28 October 1873) and Wolf Kurc (b. 9 August 1880).
Continuity and power were positive consequences of employment that influenced the coping mechanisms of older men working in the ghetto. The benefits of employment in ghetto administration and industry became clear in September 1942. All of the men still alive at the time of the Shpere Aktion—Litwin, Toplinski, Mokrski, Lentscher, and Kurc—were exempted from transport to Chełmno despite their advanced ages.

Skills and relationships cultivated before the ghettoization of Łódź Jewry served as the foundation for pleyzes and protekcja. The benefits of these concepts were solidified through dedication, loyalty, and common experience in the Łódź ghetto. The case of Pinkus Gerszowski, already 63 years old when the ghetto was established, revealed the benefits of a well-established relationship with Rumkowski. Gerszowski arrived in Łódź in 1891 and later opened a wool factory there in 1904.

The financial success of his business translated into social prominence and provided a springboard into philanthropic ventures in the Łódź Jewish community. Gerszowski was a “superintendent” at the old age home in the city and on the board of directors of one the community’s orphanages. It was through his philanthropic pursuits that Gerszowski met the future ghetto leader, Rumkowski. In 1930 the businessman agreed to finance a three-building complex in a suburb of Łódź to house an orphanage directed by Rumkowski. The relationship between these two men was forged in their...
common financial and social commitments during the interwar years. In the ghetto, their mutual pursuits of survival—both communal and individual—were dependent on that relationship.

Pinkus Gerszowski’s friendship with Rumkowski was imperative to his personal survival. Shortly after the Germans annexed Łódź to the Reich in November 1939, Gerszowski was arrested by the SS and incarcerated at Radogoszcz prison. Rumkowski came to his rescue, using his influence with German authorities to have this friend freed. Most prisoners did not benefit from such protections. A factory complex before the war, the Nazis used the facilities at Radogoszcz from 1939-1945 for the incarceration, torture, and murder of thousands of Poles and Jews.

After being freed from Radogoszcz, Gerszowski became a fixture in Rumkowski’s ghetto administration. From a variety of positions in the bureaucratic elite Gerszowski supported Rumkowski’s economic and bureaucratic goals. As a member of the Jewish Council, Gerszowski managed the financial activities of the Council from 1940 into 1944. The relationship between the two men extended beyond work. The Chronicle commented on the close nature of the friendship between the two elderly men when it reported that Rumowski took time out of his daily activities to visit the ailing Gerszowski in June 1943. When the bank was closed in March 1944, Rumkowski found managerial work for Gerszowski in the ghetto industry. At that time, Gerszowski became co-director of the ghetto’s laundry department and co-director of the Department

153 Ibid.

154 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1943, 3:257.
for Jewelry and Watch Repair.\footnote{Sascha. Riecke Feuchert and Erwin Leibfried, eds., \textit{Die Chronik des Gettos Łódź/Litzmannstadt, 1944}, vol. 4 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 176.} In an entry dedicated to Pinkus Gerszowski for the \textit{Ghetto Encyclopedia}, Oskar Rosenfeld attributed Gerszowski’s “special” position in the administration to his prewar friendship with Rumkowski.\footnote{“Gerszowski, Pinkus,” Ghetto Encyclopedia, USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 1103, Reel 256, 92.} Rosenfeld’s succinct observations revealed the undeniable importance of well-connected friends in the ghetto.

In addition to his management of ghetto finances, from 1940 through 1942 Gerszowski served on the executive committee of the Supreme Control Council \textit{[Höchste Kontrollkammer]}.\footnote{Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1941}, 1:174. Gerszowski maintained his position on the executive committee even as Rumkowski restructured the Supreme Control Council in July 1941 and again in August 1942. More details about the restructuring and Gerszowski’s specific positions can be found in the \textit{Chronicle}.} Established in November 1940, the Supreme Control Council was charged with the task of reducing corruption. Its executive committee was made up of prominent ghetto figures, including Gerszowski and Rumkowski’s own brother, Jozef. The very people who benefited from the system of “protekcja and pleyzes” that shaped social, economic, and interpersonal relations in the ghetto were expected to dismember it by responding to individual complaints lodged against corrupt factory managers.\footnote{Löw, \textit{Juden Im Getto Litzmannstadt}, 99–105. Andrea Löw offered an excellent summary of the problematic nature of the \textit{Höchster Kontrollkammer} by situating the establishment and activities of the committee within the larger context of Rumkowski’s consolidation of power and the simultaneous expansion of bureaucracy.} If the activities of the Supreme Control Council were to serve as proof that Rumkowski’s administration was fighting a culture of corruption in the ghetto, continued protection for the well-connected and the desperate attempts by the less fortunate to establish these types of relationships were evidence to the contrary.
From Rumkowski and the ghetto elite, notions of protekcja and pleyzes filtered down to all levels of the social hierarchy. Vulnerable older men and women who could not find work often attempted to reap the potential benefits promised by protekcja. In petitions to Rumkowski requesting aid, older men and women described past relationships with prominent people, mentioned interactions with ghetto leaders, and offered prominent references that would vouch for the petitioner’s good character. Rebeka Lozinski, a 68-year-old widow, described the work of her deceased husband as a “longtime associate” of Pinkus Gerszowski.159

For elderly petitioners, personal connections originating in work places before the war offered a chance at protection and influence.160 Stanislaw Szymanski named Gerszowski among five other notable community members as personal references.161 In some cases elderly petitioners were able to enlist direct assistance from prominent ghetto personalities. Some petitioners even attempted to make connections with Rumkowski himself.162 Even the most distant connections—brief encounters with Rumkowski by children, grandchildren, siblings, and cousins—were exploited in the desperate attempt to curry favor with the leader.

159 Rebeka Lozinski to Rumkowski, 28 March 1942, USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 66.

160 For example see Dawid and Tema Gitla Feldman to Rumkowski, Petition, 23 February 1942. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 144.


162 See for example Isidor Szajn to Rumkowski, Petition, 6 July 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 552-554.
1.5 Work as a Transformative Force

Beyond access to food and influential relationships that acted as safeguards in the Łódź ghetto, work performed in the ghetto also had transformative effects for the elderly from 1940-1942. At the same time, significant contributions by elderly workers ensured that the ghetto community did more than merely survive. Skills that older Jews developed in decades of prewar experience translated into activities that sustained the society’s well-being and gave life to the community as a whole.

Work itself could make a person younger. In August 1942, Oskar Singer observed the transformative effects of ghetto labor when he visited the Altmaterial-Ressort on the occasion of the second anniversary of production at the workshop. In an essay entitled “Old Material Made New! A Visit to the Workshop for Recyclables (Sulzfelder Street 71),” Singer reflected on his visit: “[Iszrael] Krauskopf is barely a man of 50, yet he feels as if he is the father of the workshop and the many elderly people who work there. Or do they only look so old? No, here almost everything is just recycled goods: materials, premises, tools, methods—and people.”163 Like the recycled materials in the workshops, the older Jews employed there were given new life. As of August 1942, employment exempted these aged ghetto workers from removal from the ghetto. Work made the aged “younger” in that they evaded, or at least postponed, death.

For elderly Jews in positions of power and influence, work could make them appear younger. Recalling his experiences in the ghetto, Itzhak Cytrynowski described

the transformative effects of power and pride on the most prominent elderly man in the
ghetto:

The Eldest of the Jews in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, the old man Rumkowski who had been forced into a new career through a misunderstanding of a German word - this 'Eldest' of the Jews had grown young again. He had become the 'Kaiser' of the Ghetto. Within one year since the sealing off of the Ghetto, he had managed to achieve the unimaginable. [...] Mr Haim Rumkowski, Eldest of the Jews, had good reason to be proud of his achievements.

And proud he was. He looked so much younger than the bent old man we had known a year earlier. He was elegantly dressed, with hat and gloves, and he would travel around the Ghetto in his horse-drawn doroszka with a woollen [sic] blanket nestling his legs to keep out the cold. [...] One had to admit that the Ghetto was starting to function with some sort of order. Whereas the Germans had planned that we would succumb to our misery, we had shown that we had every intention of surviving.164

Cytrynowski made the important observation that work could be a source of pride.

Managing to achieve the smallest victories imbued people with youthful qualities. For older men and women work provided the opportunity to find a sense of purpose.

For the elderly, work was not solely about individual survival or personal identity. Work provided very real ways to aid the wider community. Such activities had the potential to lend purpose to life beyond mere existence. Faced with rampant starvation and disease, the ghetto community was in dire need of experienced professionals who, with very few resources, could help alleviate suffering. On the front lines of the battle for survival were the doctors and other medical practitioners in the Łódź ghetto.165

165 Survivor accounts in addition to historical scholarship have noted the importance of experienced professionals in the battle against hunger and disease in the ghetto. See, for example, Beinfeld, “Health Care in the Vilna Ghetto.”
Elderly doctors applied their decades of medical experiences and good reputations within the community to fight disease in the ghetto. As a member of the Beirat from 1939 Dr. David Hellmann worked with Rumkowski from the beginning of the German occupation. Hellmann acted as Rumkowski’s representative to the German authorities until the closure of the ghetto in spring 1940. Dr. Hellmann played a critical role in the establishment and organization of the Health Department in the ghetto, which oversaw all of the hospitals, pharmacies, medical clinics, and medical supplies in the ghetto. From its establishment in October 1939 until the cordonning off of the ghetto, Hellman served as director. After leaving his position on the Jewish Council in May 1940 the doctor returned to practicing medicine. Hellman’s dedication to the community earned him far-reaching respect in the ghetto. Upon his death on 14 November 1942, the Chronicle lamented the death of a man who was “known and loved.”

Prewar experiences were of utmost importance. Many elderly male doctors who served the ghetto community began their careers as officers and medics in the Polish army. Experience in crisis situations before the ghetto period informed work in the ghetto. Dr. David Kamelhar (b. 22 June 1871) worked for the health of the ghetto until his death on 9 April 1941. Kamelhar had served in the Polish army during the Polish-Bolshevik war as a senior lieutenant colonel. When he retired in 1925 he was promoted to

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166 Dr. David Helman (b. 3 May 1875 in Częstochowa) also served in the Polish army as a medic in a mobile army hospital in the Russo-Japanese War. Hellman continued his work in Czernowicz and St. Petersburg during the 1917 Revolution. In the interwar period the doctor returned to Łódź where he established a private medical practice and worked at the Instytut Leczenia Radem Łódzkiego Towarzystwa Zwalczania Raka [Cancer Institute]. During this time he was also active in the Łódź medical community as a member of many medical associations. See Kempa and Szukalak, The Biographical Dictionary of the Jews from Łódź, 95–96. See also “Helman, David,” Ghetto Encyclopedia, USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 1103, Reel 256, 111.

167 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:553.
the rank of colonel. He continued to practice medicine at a health center in Łódź before the German invasion. In the first years of the ghetto’s existence he was the leader of the Sanitation Department and the director of one of the hospitals in the ghetto. Izydor Bette (16 January 1869 in Kalisz; died 7 July 1942 in the ghetto) was a specialist in internal medicine and a pediatrician. He had also served as a physician in the Polish Army during the Polish-Bolshevik War. Dr. Bette maintained his prewar practice at Zgierska 17 in the ghetto, working there “until the last minutes of his life.”

Successes in the medical field before the German occupation made many doctors suited for administrative and medical work in the ghetto. Dr. Fabian Klozenberg (b. 18/23 February 1876 in Warsaw) was a doctor at the National Insurance System and director of the neurology department at the Poznanski Hospital in Łódź during the interwar period. In the ghetto he served as director of the hospital at 34/36 Lagiewnicka and also directed the Scientific Circle [Kolo Naukowe]:

Immediately after the establishment of the ghetto, he [Dr. Klozenberg] was appointed by the Chairman to Chief Physician at Hospital I and exercised the function of consultant to Hospitals II, III, and IV. Later, he also worked in Ambulatories II and IV. His extraordinary position as a doctor and social personality prompted the Chairman to appoint him a member of the Council of the Department of Health.


169 Feuchert and Leibfried, *Chronik des Gettos, 1941*, 1:118. This entry mentioned Kamelhar’s prewar position. His ghetto activities were included in one of the appendices of the supplementary materials that accompany the German-language edition of the *Chronicle*.


Administrative experience combined with years of medical practice shaped the work Klozenberg did to develop a system of care in the ghetto.

Among this age cohort there were few female doctors. Dr. Helena Borzekowska was one of very few female medical doctors in the Łódź ghetto.\textsuperscript{173} Dr. Borzekowska was critical for ailing women and children in the ghetto and earned her respect among the ghetto elite. An experienced gynecologist before the war, Borzekowska continued her work in the ghetto. In a speech honoring the opening of a \textit{Diätladen} [a kind of nutrition shop devoted to health foods and herbal supplements] at Lutomierska 17 on 6 April 1942, Rumkowski extended general and specific thanks to Dr. Borzekowska. He praised her work with “childbearing women” [\textit{Wöchnerinnen}] and “in the name of small children.” Rumkowski also credited Borzekowska with raising awareness about the “enormous importance” the store would have for the ghetto population, in particular its targeted population—the sick, the children, and the aged living in the ghetto.\textsuperscript{174}

Jews who arrived from the west in October and November 1941 were pitied by the native population for their inability to adapt to life in the ghetto. Most were older, and all were dispossessed and disoriented by an unfamiliar culture and language. The arrival of Jews from the west brought an influx of elderly doctors into the Łódź ghetto. “Foreign” Jews who were able to integrate into ghetto society stood a better chance at survival, and the most resilient among them were elderly doctors.

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\textsuperscript{173} Helena Borzekowska’s birth year is disputed. In the German-language edition of the \textit{Chronicle} it is listed as either 17 May 1879 or 1887.

Wilhelm Caspari (b. 4 February 1872) was a doctor and cancer researcher. He arrived in the ghetto from Frankfurt/Main in October 1941. Rumkowski gave him the opportunity to continue his research in the hospital’s laboratory. From early 1942 until the end of that year, Caspari studied the relationship between nutrition and specific ghetto illnesses. After the liquidation of the hospital he was transferred to the Statistical Department where he studied death in the ghetto.

“Foreign” elderly also set up medical practices. Dr. Hugo Klement (b. 24 November 1876) and Dr. Walter Altschul (b. 6 August 1883) arrived in the ghetto on one of the transports from Prague. The two elderly doctors opened and maintained a medical practice until their deaths on 24 December 1942. Klement and Altschul devoted their daily lives in the ghetto to their work and as a result broke the pattern associated with their counterparts from Germany and Austria. Their medical work transformed them into viable members of the new community and provided much needed medical aid to the sick. Doctors who continued their practice altered the realities of death and disease that they encountered in the ghetto. Instead of languishing in the despair that infiltrated dwellings that housed newly arrived “foreign” Jews, work occupied the mind and passed the time with purpose. Both Altschul and Klement avoided the murder of the elderly in September 1942.


176 Ibid., 26.

177 The Chronicle noted the deaths of these two doctors. See Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:609.
1.6 Conclusion: Work as a Senescent Force

Work in all of its iterations—past, present, and potential—occupied an influential position in the daily lives of older Jews living in the Łódź ghetto. It informed self-understanding, shaped interpersonal relationships, and determined chances for survival. This chapter examined the elderly’s participation in and reactions to Rumkowski’s strategy to use production as a means for survival. It revealed the reciprocal relationship between work, self-understanding, and survival among older Jews in the Łódź ghetto.

Decades of work prior to the German invasion in September 1939 defined the identities of older men and women and equipped them with a set of skills with which they approached the challenges of their new reality. Some older people parlayed prewar occupations into gainful employment, and occasionally power, in the ghetto. Others lost themselves in the existential struggle that accompanied losing the ability to perform familiar duties. Some adapted easily to new jobs when they were available. Others succumbed to the challenge of learning new tasks while contending with physical decline associated with advanced age and accelerated by lack of proper nutrition. In the range of reactions, the centrality of work was constant. Despite the seemingly precarious situation of older men and women, documentary evidence offered little support for the argument that older men and women felt obliged to prove that they were worthy of existence in cases in which they could not work.

Rumkowski’s campaign to save the Jews of Łódź through the organization of a vital workforce shaped life for ghetto inhabitants of all ages. The centrality of work had particular import for aging Jews attempting to adapt to the demands of Rumkowski’s policies. The intrinsic connection between work and self-identification cultivated before
1939 translated into steadfast ideas about the options available to older people. In some cases, work provided opportunities to obtain basic necessities—food and income. For the privileged few, work reinforced a sense of self and enabled older people to maintain independence. Duties and activities performed by older, experienced Jews also contributed to the well-being of the entire ghetto community.

Work had transformative effects on the aged who were able to take pride in the successes—large and small—that they achieved. Ultimately, however, the ghetto succumbed to the senescent effects of labor that were part of German design. Aging bodies could not sustain hard labor. Caring for the aged and unemployed put increasing stress on fundamental social structures, above all on Jewish families in the Łódź ghetto.
2.1 Introduction

In 1941 Josef Zelkowicz visited the apartment of 77-year-old Devorah Hannah. There he encountered a scene typical of life in the Łódź ghetto. Seventeen people crowded into a single apartment. All had been welcomed into Devorah Hannah’s home when German occupation authorities forced the Jews of Łódź into an impoverished section of the city in the spring of 1940. Three branches of the same family, previously living separate but connected lives, were together again. Devorah Hannah was “the trunk from which all three families sprouted.”

The room the families inhabited was cramped. They shared three beds among them, definitely not enough for everyone to claim a spot to lay their heads. After relinquishing her beds to her children and grandchildren, Devorah Hannah and her youngest grandchild—the orphaned, 18-month-old Leibeleh—shared a nest of blankets in one corner of the room. Food was scarce and strictly rationed. Young children whimpered from overwhelming hunger, unable to comprehend why their parents could not offer more food. Family members bickered. But, in Devorah Hannah’s estimation,
Josef Zelkowicz’s observations of Devorah Hannah and her family revealed the atomization so many Jewish families experienced in the ghettos of German-occupied Eastern Europe. Her experiences as an aging woman depicted the ways in which the most fundamental communal network in Jewish society—the family—struggled to preserve the interpersonal bonds that held the family together. Escalating persecution and deteriorating material conditions created an environment that tested the strength of family commitments.

The assault on the family and the responses of family members were multifaceted and non-linear. As families responded to hunger, overcrowding, fatigue, disease, and death they experienced moments of extraordinary solidarity as well as moments of devastating abasement. Family constructs were continuously revised and reinvented. The experiences of older Jews in particular revealed the implicit commitments and expectations fundamental to family cohesion; the process by which families responded to persecution—shrinking and expanding when necessary or beneficial; and the devastation that overwhelmed family life when family members living in circumstances of unrelenting persecution could not fulfill mutual expectations.

An analysis of the elderly in the context of family life relies on three interrelated lines of inquiry that shed light on important themes of individual and communal 

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178 Josef Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days: Writings from the Ghetto, ed. Michal Unger, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002), 113–121. A portion of Zelkowicz’s reportage, including this vignette, appeared in a collected volume edited by Michal Unger. Unless otherwise noted I have used the published translation. I have also consulted the archival version of these materials. Josef Zelkowicz; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 900; YIVO.
experiences. First, I draw on recent explorations of family life during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{179} The family was the locus for direct interaction between individual Jews and the wider community. My analysis substantiates and expands on Dalia Ofer’s work that “reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the Jewish family in extremis, highlighting the role of tradition in the cohesion or dissolution of family bonds.”\textsuperscript{180} Putting the elderly at the center of an analysis of the family reveals the reciprocal expectations that shaped traditional family relationships and sheds light on the process by which the family structure dissolved.

Second, much of family history has been embedded in the study of women’s history. Gendered interpretations of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust inform my analysis of aged individuals and the aging ghetto community, too. Scholarship using gender analysis has focused on parent-child, and in particular mother-child relationships,


\textsuperscript{180}Dalia Ofer, Cohesion and Rupture, 143.
in addition to the changing role of women in the family.\textsuperscript{181} Introducing the concept of age into the study of the family challenges our understanding of evolving family structures and suggests new ways of considering gender roles.

A third critical realm of analysis (and one that overlaps with the previous two) is marriage. Often overlooked in scholarship, the marital relationship—its history, its official recognition, and its loss—constituted the epicenter of the family unit for the elderly. Even when co-residence between aging parents and adult children was common in the ghettos, German and Jewish authorities alike designated older Jews (whether single or married) as a separate family unit. My examination of the marriage relationship draws on important scholarship on marital status in postwar German history,\textsuperscript{182} and on work on the role of intermarriage during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{183} Particularly enlightening for understanding connections between Jewish marriage patterns and the distribution of


\textsuperscript{182} Elizabeth D. Heineman, \textit{What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Elizabeth Heineman gave a detailed and convincing account of the significance of marital status for women in postwar Germany.

communal welfare resources in prewar Poland is the work of Shaul Stampfer. \(^{184}\)

Considering the significance of marriage and other types of intimate partnerships in the lives of elderly ghetto inhabitants enhances our understanding of the ways in which older Jews reinvented family structures and highlights the central importance of partnerships.

Reconstructing the family experiences of older Jews in the Łódź ghetto presented distinct methodological challenges. Because few older people wrote about their experiences in the ghetto and even fewer survived to record their memories after the war, one must approach the task of reading primary sources dealing with family life with caution. Letters and diaries written in the ghetto are far more likely to reveal the intense emotional interactions that characterized family relationships as a consequence of scarcity and overcrowding in the ghetto.

This is not to say that all contemporary sources can be taken at face value. In the case of petition letters submitted to the Jewish Council in the Łódź ghetto, aged authors presented, exaggerated, and denied the truth of family in order to curry favor with Rumkowski. In contrast postwar testimonies and memoirs present overwhelmingly positive representations of elderly family members. The tendency to memorialize grandparents in postwar recollections denies the human dimension—both positive and negative—present in the daily interactions between family members. Sifting through contemporary melodramas and postwar pieties is essential to the process of uncovering the contours of elderly experiences in the context of family life.

Elderly men and women acted as critical forces in the preservation of traditional family structures in the ghetto. Maintaining independence was a high priority for older Jews. When circumstances required co-residency of multiple generations, older members adapted individual expectations to the new demands of family life. The desire to maintain self-sufficiency shifted focus from the preservation of the individual to the preservation of the individual as a member of the family. Experiences of older men and women testified to the devastating conflicts between individual expectations and unsustainable familial obligations. Hunger, disease, and death in the Łódź ghetto acted as a physical and emotional assault on individuals and the family. Family relationships simply could not withstand the cumulative effects of German policies.

Older family members were often the first victims of familial disintegration. In response to the dissolution of prewar family structures, the aged found solace in smaller family units. Partnerships stood as the last bulwark against Nazi destruction. As partners, older Jews prevented their own isolation, thwarted the complete dissolution of the family, and remained a defense for human dignity in the ghetto community.

2.2 Preserving Autonomy and Tradition in Elderly Families

Traditional Jewish families in the interwar period maintained nuclear family households. Contrary to nostalgic narratives of prewar Jewish living, older men and women expected to live their last days with a spouse in their own homes. Independence was a cherished and imperative commodity. Reincorporation into the household of an
adult child was viewed as a last resort and even a travesty.\textsuperscript{185} Josef Zelkowicz reported that in the wake of her husband’s death, Devorah Hannah prayed that she would “never be in need of her children’s kindness.”\textsuperscript{186}

Fear of being a burden was a common sentiment expressed by the aged, especially as they became more dependent on outside help. Thus, in the Łódź ghetto elderly Jews attempted to preserve traditional family arrangements in which aging men and women lived on their own and supported themselves. In the context of traditional family structures, marital relationships were particularly significant in shaping the experiences of the aged in the ghettos. Couplehood often provided the continuity and stability necessary to maintain a certain degree of independence and self-sufficiency.

Multigenerational households were born out of necessity in the ghettos during the war. When approximately 164,000 Jews were crowded into the 2.41 square kilometers of livable space designated for the Łódź ghetto, extreme overcrowding demanded that multiple families resided in cramped quarters. People naturally attempted to create a familiar environment to ease the transition.

Even before the ghetto was established, families came together. Katherine Alex was 68 years old when she arrived in Łódź to live with her son Fritz and daughter-in-law Ella. At the time, the Vienna native had been living in Brno, Czechoslovakia while her


\textsuperscript{186} Zelkowicz, \textit{In Those Terrible Days}, 118.
son worked as an engineer in Łódź. When the Wehrmacht invaded Poland in September 1939, Mrs. Alex traveled to Łódź to be with her family. By the time she moved into the ghetto in 1940, she was all alone. Like so many young Jews in the first weeks of German occupation in Łódź, her son Fritz disappeared in November 1939, never to be seen again.  

The general desire for autonomy did not necessarily mean separate residences for the aged. The terror that characterized the weeks and months of German occupation in Łódź often brought family members together in spite of tradition. Many Jews sought refuge from German persecution with family members, particularly older men and women who lived apart from their children. Being in the presence of family could offer great comfort in a time of uncertainty, but the reunion of family members could also re-spark old feuds. In some cases, such as the aforementioned example of Devorah Hannah, older men and women opened their homes to the younger generations of the family. In other cases, like that of Yakov Zaltsberg, adult children welcomed the presence of aging parents.  

It was very often the case, whether due to need or convenience, that elderly men and women could not maintain separate residences or support themselves. For elderly Jews living with multiple generations of family members, the importance of asserting one’s independence remained essential. To the extent that the aged did not and could not work in an official capacity in the ghetto, older men and women found ways to contribute

187 Katherine Alex to Rumkowski, Petition, 28 October 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 251.

188 Zaltsberg to Rumkowski, 626, 692-693.
to the well-being of their families. In this way, they maintained a certain degree of independence from family members, demonstrated their “value” to the family unit, and counteracted any feelings (real or perceived) that they were a burden.

Securing food was a source of pride for Jews of all ages in the Łódź ghetto. Collecting rations could be a tedious process, especially for older people. Standing in lines for hours, weathering the elements, and dragging heavy rations back to the family dwelling were not possible for those of ill health or poor physical stature. Rita Hilton (née Lewin) lived in the Łódź ghetto with her mother and maternal grandparents. Despite losing his job, Hilton’s grandfather, Majer Klajnert, wanted to “do his share.” Hilton recalled the pride her grandfather felt after successfully securing some meat for the family:

He had the red cross band and a special hat, that’s [sic] how they identified various officials in town and people who had special professions. He would stay in lines for rations like meat and because of his age and because of the fact that he was a doctor they would sometimes let him go ahead of the line. He was always very proud when he could bring some meat or some dairy products home.190

Rita Hilton described a scene of deference and reverence for the aged in the Łódź Ghetto. Other evidence has suggested that Hilton’s description might be more positive than the general experiences, especially in cases when food (such a scarce commodity)

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189 Rita Hilton noted this difficulty when she recounted the process of getting food in the Łódź Ghetto. She wrote, “There were long lines and we often stood until the middle of the night in lines to get our rations. After we got the rations my mother and I, (because the old people couldn’t do it) had to take this big sack on our back and carry it home. It was a hard job […]” Rita Kerner Hilton, “My Story (Memoir of Rita Kerner Hilton),” USHMM, RG-02, File 164, 65.

190 Ibid., 67.
was involved.\textsuperscript{191} Perhaps this reflection, which was emblematic of Rita Hilton’s affection for her grandfather, was more indicative of the strong bond between a granddaughter and grandfather.\textsuperscript{192} Nevertheless, this example illustrates the will of the aged to remain vital members of the family unit.

Older men and women found other ways to contribute to the household and ease the burden of working family members. In the Łódź ghetto Rita Hilton and her mother worked long hours. In her memoir Hilton described the morning ritual. She and her mother would get out of the bed they shared extra early to make the fire necessary to heat their coffee. Hilton recalled how grateful they were when her maternal grandmother, Szajndla Klajnert, would venture out early in the morning to pick up hot water or coffee. This simple act allowed Rita Hilton and her mother a few more minutes of precious rest.\textsuperscript{193}

As simple as the act of walking to the store to pick up hot water might sound, this chore proved to be a precarious one for Szajndla Klajnert. More than once, Mrs. Klajnert returned to the family’s apartment with a “bloody face” after falling in the street. The family “finally stopped her [grandmother] from going for water.”\textsuperscript{194} Rita Hilton stated this decision with a matter-of-factness that obscured the implications for her

\textsuperscript{191} Zelkowicz, \textit{In Those Terrible Days}, 197–201. Zelkowicz described brutal fights between ghetto inhabitants while queuing for rations in the ghetto.

\textsuperscript{192} Rita Hilton’s admiration and veneration for her grandfather are evident in her written memoir and in the oral testimony she gave at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 12 August 1994. Mrs. Hilton attributed her survival to her “family unit” and especially the presence of her grandparents in the ghettos. She implied that taking care of her elderly grandparents gave her mother and herself the will to live. USHMM RG-50.030*0002; Rita Hilton.

\textsuperscript{193} Hilton, \textit{My Story}, 66.

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 67.
grandmother. Perhaps Hilton’s grandmother welcomed the family’s decision. It is unlikely that Szajndla Klajnert would have volunteered to get water if she did not welcome the opportunity to help her daughter and granddaughter. To be stripped of this responsibility must have been difficult for the old woman.

Szajndla Klajnert’s injury was not uncommon for an older person living in the best circumstances. Ailments in old age, like osteoporosis, were exacerbated by lack of proper nutrition in the ghetto. Such conditions made simple errands and activities particularly perilous for aged Jews. Hilton recalled of her grandmother’s condition: “We also needed some vitamin pills for my grandmother because she had a problem with her bones. I suspected that was why she was falling so much. So we had to buy very expensive vitamins for her on the black market.”

The fragility of old age could be detrimental to the survival of elderly individuals but also to the families that cared for them. Mrs. Klajnert’s family spent precious resources on the black market to ease the old woman’s declining health. Rita Hilton’s assessment of the family’s sacrifice benefited from the temporal distance between family actions in the ghetto and recalling those actions forty years later. The decision to buy vitamins on the black market rather than extra food or other life-giving resources that could have benefited the entire family could not have been an easy one at the time.

Frailty of age made older Jews more vulnerable to injury. Family support was critical to the survival of older Jews who suffered physical trauma in the ghetto. Unlike Szajndla Klajnert, Chaja Karp was not fortunate to have any relatives in the ghetto to help

195 Ibid., 68.
care for her. Mrs. Karp, a self-described “old, fragile” woman, reported a similar incident in September 1941. The 72-year-old woman was “crushed in the crowd” while standing in line for lunch one day and had to take to bed for a month.

2.3 External Pressures, Effects on the Elderly, and Family Responses

German policies shaped conditions in the ghetto that accelerated the rate at which older men and women became dependent on family members. Increased dependence of the elderly contributed to heightened anxiety in all family members and made the intimacy and compassion characteristic of familial relationships ever more difficult to sustain. As a result, families shrank into smaller and smaller units of bond by mutual obligation. For elderly Jews, the process of atomization did not translate into complete isolation. Rather, partnerships served as the basis for elderly notions of family in the Łódź ghetto.

The Jewish Council in Łódź implemented a program of social assistance on 20 September 1940. Announcement 123 enabled families in need to apply for graduated monetary assistance. The social welfare scheme privileged the elderly of the community—the older the recipient, the more aid he or she was eligible to receive. Monetary aid was welcomed, but at 10 Marks per month it was hardly enough to support the needs of elderly individuals. And even if the extra money could help, the process of

196 Chaja Karp to Rumkowski, Petition, 10 September 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 368-370.
197 Rumkowski, Announcement No. 123, 20 September 1940; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 247; YIVO. The Welfare Department of the Ghetto Administration distributed financial assistance to ghetto inhabitants based on age: 7 marks per child up to 14 years of age; 10 marks to elderly over 60; 20 marks to those eighty and older. Recipients of welfare were exempted from paying rent, but had to do the work that they were assigned by the Jewish Council.
submitting an application for review excluded many of those who could have benefited the most. Making a trip to the Welfare Department and standing in line for many hours was not always a physical possibility for people of advanced age.

In this situation, too, the aged were dependent on family members for direct assistance. In his account of Devorah Hannah’s experience, Josef Zelkowicz noted that Devorah Hannah’s paralysis prevented her from submitting a written petition for assistance in person. One of the children could have accepted responsibility for Devorah Hannah. But, as Zelkowicz noted, the meager amount of money simply was not worth “the burden of adding an old woman to their families and sustaining her.”

Cohabitation of multiple generations in the ghetto could also mean the expansion of duties for older men and women in the family. Josef Zelkowicz recorded his impressions of family life and social relations in the Łódź ghetto while visiting homes as an inspector for the Jewish Council’s Social Welfare Department. In one home he observed an old woman’s busy-ness as she attempted to fulfill the duties associated with caring for her husband and adult children. Zelkowicz described the scene as he entered the dwelling:

A father and four adult children are pacing about. They circulate idly in the room, swallow their spit, and watch the housewife, a dwarfish, desiccated woman standing at a wooden bucket and washing clothes. Not others’ clothes, Heaven forbid - she's got her own, thank God. There are eight souls in the household, may the evil eye not befall them.

In this apartment were two sources of anxiety, strictly divided. The men paced, agitated in their idleness, unsure of what to do in the presence of a woman who moved

\[198\] Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days*, 120.
and acted with purpose. The mother flitted around the room, propelled by chores created for her by the men she only indirectly acknowledged. Zelkowicz reported the old mother’s assessment of the family’s current situation:

Yes, times used to be better. In the past, another child meant another pair of working hands, another breadwinner, another source of support in old age... We could afford it. Of course, if we'd known that a war would break out and we'd be left sitting like carcasses on a butchers' counter, and every additional child means another mouth to feed and another shirt to wash - in cold water and without soap...199

Before the war, as this aging mother noted, having a large family was insurance for a couple in old age. In the ghetto, the old woman now took the responsibility of caring for an unemployed husband and four adult children out of work. Idleness for the men meant more labor for the women.

Prewar gender norms and expectations shaped the responses of older men and women to unemployment in the ghetto. Older men without work spent more hours in confined spaces with their families. Idleness created more work for their female partners and caretakers. These circumstances could put great stress on the couple. During Zelkowicz’s visit, the father responded to his wife’s appraisal of her duties and the family’s situation. According to Zelkowicz, he said:

Anyway, what my wife says about washing clothes in cold water and with no soap, that’s her business. It’s not my fault at all. She can do the laundry if she wants, and not if she doesn’t. I’ve never meddled in running the household and I don’t want to do so in the future. But as for what she said about another kid and another kid, she’s right on the mark...200


200 Ibid., 68.
In this vignette, the husband’s response was at once dismissive and defensive. Asserting a division of labor based on traditional gender roles, he belittled his wife’s complaint about the extra work she took on in the ghetto. At the heart of the man’s response was a defensive reaction to changes in his own role in the family. Unemployment in the ghetto stripped him of his role as a provider, as it did most men. The sudden absence of purpose and daily activity was particularly difficult for older ghetto inhabitants and could cause great stress in the family. If he could not work or provide for his family, how could the patriarch of a family model the duties of a father for his adult children? The husband insisted that the family’s circumstances in the ghetto were not his “fault.” His defensiveness was a response to his wife, but perhaps even more so an explanation to “the four young men at his side.”

The complicated position of elderly family members was particularly evident in cases when older men and women recognized the burden they placed on the family. Such examples reveal the pressures on families living *in extremis*. At 72 years old Fajga Szpigel lived with her daughter, Bronislawa Kon, and son-in-law in the Łódź ghetto. As Mrs. Szpigel described the situation, Bronislawa assumed the overwhelming responsibility of taking care of dependent children, an ailing spouse, and her aging mother on top of working long hours. Mrs. Szpigel could sense the tension in the household and recognized that she had become a “burden” to her daughter. She feared

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201 Ibid.
that her presence was a serious disturbance to family life and believed that it was the cause of the “eternal family strife.”

By May 1942, Mrs. Szpigel did not feel comfortable living in her daughter’s home and sought refuge in one of the homes for the aged run by the Judenrat in the Łódź ghetto. In her estimation, the family unit no longer provided the means to meet her ultimate goal as an “old mother.” Mrs. Szpigel wanted to be united with her other children. She was “not yet ready to die.”

The reunion of multiple generations and branches of different families was not always welcomed, and in many cases the presence of elderly dependents was too much responsibility for family members to bear. Josef Hertz arrived in the Łódź ghetto from Cologne on 23 October 1941 with his 80-year-old mother Flora. By early November, Hertz had determined that he could not care for his mother. Even though the pair had received their bedding, Mr. Hertz explained that he was not able to heat the room where they were living. His mother would not survive the winter cold.

Josef Hertz’s desperation was clear. When his first request for help from the Jewish Council was not acknowledged, he submitted a second petition just two weeks later. Mr. Hertz’s letters reflected the anguish of a man attempting to navigate an

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203 Ibid., 29.

204 Josef Hertz to Rumkowski, Petition on behalf of Flora Hertz, 6 November 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 343.

205 Josef Hertz to Rumkowski, Petition on behalf of Flora Hertz, 20 November 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 314.
unnerving physical environment in an unfamiliar culture. The burden of caring for an elderly mother in a room with no heat, inadequate bedding, and no recourse for food was not only difficult for the aging woman; it was also an impediment to his own survival.

Solid family units based on mutual affection and commitment relied on each member to fulfill certain explicit and implicit expectations. Conditions in the Łódź ghetto made it increasingly difficult for family members to fulfill those mutual obligations. In the case of older generations, elderly men and women expected family members to provide care when they could no longer care for themselves. Refusal to take care of elderly family members was a source of resentment and conflict within the family. Anna Kalmanowicz lived with her son, a member of the ghetto fire brigade. The 78-year-old women lamented the fact that her son “takes no interest in me, and even though he works for the fire brigade and receives his pay, he will not help me financially at all.” Mrs. Kalmanowicz felt she was owed a certain amount of support from the son she had raised, especially given his relatively decent financial position.

Ubiquitous starvation made it difficult for families to maintain the level of civility necessary for survival of the family unit. Extreme hunger was enough to degrade the strongest relationships. Elderly men and women were particularly vulnerable. Older Jews often relied on family members to collect and supply food. Many were not so fortunate to have a family member willing to help in this context. When older men and women were

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206 Josef Zelkowicz wrote about the particular plight of elderly Jews from the Altreich in his exposé on the home for the aged on Gnieźnieńska Street in 1942. See Zelkowicz, “Der tsam vaklt sikh… (ayndrukhn fun a bazukh in moshev-skeynim ofy der Gnezner gas),” 2 July 1942; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 861; YIVO.

denied food by their families, they often turned to the Jewish Council for assistance. It must have been a crushing realization when commitments implied by the intimate bonds of family were not fulfilled.

In February 1941, 70-year-old Gitta Wajcenfeld requested aid from the community after living with her sons. She pleaded for help from “Mr. Rumkowski who looks after old people,” implying that her family had failed to do so. Mrs. Wajcenfeld claimed that her sons left her “to completely starve.” In the wake of broken family commitments, she threw herself at the mercy of the Łódź ghetto welfare system.

Arguments over food could turn vitriolic, leading to family betrayals unimaginable before the ghetto. Older men and women living with younger family members found themselves in particularly precarious situations when it came time to dole out food rations. In April 1941, 65-year-old Jakov Blumenkrants described the corrosive effects of starvation on intergenerational relationships. Mr. Blumenkrants resided with his daughter, son-in-law, and their small children in flat number 10 at Litomierska 26 in the ghetto. During the first year of the ghetto period, while the family was still “earning a little something,” he had enough to eat and life was “tolerable.” But in recent months, food had been scarce and quarrels had erupted in the family.

Jakov Blumenkrants lamented the fact that everything was “naturally” taken out on him. The aging grandfather discovered that the children were stealing his food. Imagine the shock he felt when, upon protesting this injustice, his grandchildren insulted him and “spit in an inhumane manner.” Family quarrels had become so disruptive that

208 Gitta Wajcenfeld to Rumkowski, Petition, 18 February 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 327.
neighbors frequently intervened on the old man’s behalf but to no avail. Feelings of betrayal and hopelessness pervaded each line of Mr. Blumenkrants’ letter, and were most evident in his admission that: “I would rather be dead than stay with them in this flat.”

Blumenkrants’ dilemma reflected the devastating effects of German policies. Hunger ravaged family relationships and pitted family members against one another. The construct of the ghetto ensured that instead of fighting the actual perpetrators of violence, Jews would struggle against one another to procure basic necessities for survival. In this context, elderly Jews fought with the children they had raised and the grandchildren they had loved. In the case of Mr. Blumenkrants, leaving the family unit offered a more tolerable solution than remaining isolated and shunned in a familial setting.

Family tensions erupted into shouting matches with some frequency in the ghetto. The close proximity of neighbors made conflicts difficult to deny. Parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren alike quarreled over food rations, household duties, and more. Hunger, fatigue, and illness brought families to their breaking points. On the fringe of the productive family unit, the elderly were first to be excluded from the benefits of multigenerational family networks. In the case of Mr. Blumenkrants, he sought life beyond the family on his own accord. In other situations, younger family members made that decision for their elders.

The family of 73-year-old Chanie Kotek appealed to admit the elderly women to the community’s home for the aged in March 1942. The family of eight simply could not tolerate Mrs. Kotek’s belligerence, which seemed to intensify as she became weaker from

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209 Jakov Blumenkrants to Rumkowski, Petition, 16 April 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 594-595.
hunger and illness. According to the petition submitted by her son-in-law, the old woman argued constantly with her grandchildren. The disruptive nature of Mrs. Kotek’s interactions with family members and her worsening health motivated family members to remove the old woman from the family dwelling and place her in the care of the community.

In some cases, aged parents and grandparents felt that younger generations inhibited their chances for survival. After the death of his wife in July 1940, 76-year-old Chanania Chaim Engel moved in with his children.210 A year later in July 1941, Mr. Engel was ready to leave the family dwelling. A surface reading of his petition for admission to a home for the aged suggested that Engel believed himself to be a burden to the families. A closer examination of the letter revealed the possibility of additional motivations. For Engel, residence in the home for the aged was necessary, because he “was extremely anxious” and required the “utmost quiet” to live.211 What was Engel’s intention? Did he hope to relieve his family of the undue burden of taking care of an aging man? Or did he wish to escape the chaos of the family home in the ghetto? Perhaps he sought refuge from a crowded and noisy apartment that threatened his mental and physical health.

Older Jews were not necessarily passive subjects to the whims of their younger family members. Indeed the actions of older men and women could have considerable influence on the fate of the rest of the family. An incident that involved the highest levels


211 Ibid., 529. (Emphasis in the original.)
of the Jewish administration serves to illustrate. On 5 March 1941, Jewish Police arrested 61-year-old Mojsze David Herszkowicz, the director of the carpentry workshop at Pucka 9. The ghetto court tried Herszkowicz on the charge that he had exploited his position as a workshop director to extort bribes from the suppliers of raw materials. The presiding members of the court, chaired by Rumkowski, found Herszkowicz “irrefutably guilty.” The court meted out a sentence of four months for Herszkowicz and demanded that he surrender the bribe money.

In addition to Herszkowicz’s individual sentence, the court handed a devastating punishment to the old man’s family. Herszkowicz’s sons, both of whom worked for the Jewish Council administration, were stripped of their positions.213 In a matter of weeks in March 1941, the Herszkowicz family fell from its relatively good position in the ghetto. Without jobs, father and sons lost a stable income, the ability to obtain food, and access to beneficial relationships associated with their positions in the ghetto bureaucracy and industry. Regardless of the nature of father-son relations before the trial, the summary punishment must have strained relationships among all of the family members.

Death and disappearance had profound impact on family cohesion. For elderly Jews in particular, the death of family members and the threat of their own deaths made them vulnerable and required them to reassess the family unit. In the first months of the ghetto period in Łódź older Jews died at a higher rate than any other age group. Between late 1940 and September 1942, death rates among older ghetto residents leveled off.


213 See Ibid., 1:89–90. An account of the trial and sentencing appeared in the Chronicle later in March, in an entry summarizing news from the Geto-Tsaytung.
Within this timeframe, the aged responded to an unnatural dissolution of the Jewish family and developed ways of coping with family in the wake of trauma. The sequence of life—that one generation follows the next—was turned on its head in the Łódź ghetto. That younger Jews died before the older generation became a fact of life, especially after 1940. Mortality statistics from the first two years of the ghetto period showed that people over 60 years of age died at a larger rate than any other age group during the first months of the ghetto period. Older Jews accounted for approximately 45 percent of the total number of deaths between May and December 1940. Most often the cause of death was registered as “heart disease” or “heart weakness” [Herzkrankheiten or Herzschwäche].214

In the summer of 1940, during the peak months of the dysentery epidemic that plagued the Łódź ghetto, nearly 45 percent of the total number of Jews who succumbed to the disease (2,254 people) were over 60 years old.215 A change occurred in 1941 and 1942. As the dysentery epidemic was brought under control, rates of elderly mortality slowed. At the same time, Jews in the age groups most likely to be conscripted into hard labor became increasingly vulnerable to the long-term effects of hunger and to the spread of tuberculosis. As a result, in 1941 and 1942 there was a marked increase in death rates among ghetto residents aged 15 to 60 years.216

214 Department of Statistics, “Todesfälle nach Todesursachen im Jahre 1940”; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 800; YIVO.

215 Department of Statistics, “Todesfälle nach Alter der Verstorbenen, 1940-1942”; Nachman Zonabed Collection; RG 241, Folder 800; YIVO.

216 “Todesfälle nach Alter der Verstorbenen”; RG 241, Folder 800; YIVO. The number of deaths of people aged 15-60 in 1940 was 2,492. Mortality rates of late adolescents and adults more than doubled in 1941 (6,947 deaths) and remained at that increased level in 1942 (6,647).
Widespread death among people considered to be in the prime of life had unsettling effects on the entire community. Oskar Rosenfeld remarked on this perversion of life’s usual trajectory in his diary:

The old saying “Die and become” was also given short shrift. The Jewish concept of ovais ovousaynu [Hebr., avot avotenu; our forefathers] was likewise lost in the face of the daily events. While in the past, generation followed generation in a natural sequence, in accordance with the historical consciousness, with Jewish tradition, with biblical worldview. “He returned to his fathers,” now everything is mixed up: the son before the father, the grandchild before the grandfather, the young before the old. Absurd, ludicrous, unharmonious—therefore the chaotic states of mind, therefore that which is call “godless.” Dying has lost its celestial beauty, its wondrous secret felt as sacrosanct. The mystery of death is desecrated hourly by the brutality of its earthly cause—hunger, which desecrates.\textsuperscript{217}

The consequences of German policies—starvation, endemic disease, and ultimately, death—disrupted family dynamics and posed particular challenges for older Jews who outlived their younger family members.

Death of an adult child was no less difficult for elderly parents than for the middle-aged who mourned the loss of a young child. Older parents expressed shock and anguish at the deaths of their children. Sura-Shayndl Shrayboym lost all three of her children during the first and second phases of the German Aktionen that began in January 1942. The 72-year-old mother explained the sequence of the events. Her oldest son was “sent out” of the ghetto during the first week of the Aktion. Another son, 46 years old, died in the ghetto during the weeks that followed. During the first week of March her only daughter received a summons to report for transport from the ghetto. Mrs.

\textsuperscript{217} Rosenfeld, \textit{In the Beginning was the Ghetto}, 46.
Shrayboym wrote, “great is my anguish and desperation, remaining one soul, alone, torn from my children.”\textsuperscript{218}

In some cases, older men and women felt abandoned after losing a middle-aged son or daughter. This response was especially evident when the older generation could not rely on emotional and material support from in-laws. In a letter to Rumkowski dated 14 February 1941, Chaya Sura Tenenboym complained of the awful treatment she received from her son-in-law, a Mr. Tentser. The 62-year-old woman claimed she was denied welfare aid from the community because she lived with her son-in-law and he held a job.\textsuperscript{219} The Jewish administration expected related residents of the same dwelling to provide the provisions and care necessary for all family members.

But community expectations did not easily translate into self-sacrifice in the ghetto. On the contrary, Mrs. Tenenboym complained that her son-in-law would not share food rations with her and even denied her a place to sleep by taking away all of her bedding.\textsuperscript{220} The aging woman’s letter revealed that not all family ties afforded equal respect. Older men and women who suffered the loss of an adult child in the ghetto suffered a double blow when the spouse of the deceased refused them support.

Sometimes in-laws were brought closer together after the death of a loved one. Itzhak Cytrynowski recalled his father-in-law’s reactions after the death of his son.

[...:] My brother-in-law had succumbed to the harsh winter [of 1941], and relentless hunger. Unlike myself, he had decided to

\textsuperscript{218} Sura-Shayndla Shrayboym to Rumkowski, Petition, 6 March 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 86.

\textsuperscript{219} Chaya Sura Tenenboym to Rumkowski, Petition, 14 February 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 671.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
preserve the little energy he retained, by going to bed. Thousands of people had done the same; the majority were never to leave their beds again. My brother-in-law was one such casualty. His death had a shattering effect on my father-in-law.

He had always been a quiet man who found it hard to express his feelings openly. After the death of his only son, Berl, I noticed how precious his daughter-in-law became to him. The young widow replaced his lost child, and he started living for her and for my family too.221

Cytrynowksi observed a transformation in his father-in-law in response to the incongruous effects of a child’s death, as described by Rosenfeld. The “shattering” consequences of his son’s death demanded a reassessment of his own approach to life. The previously “quiet” old man found new life in outward expressions of love and care for his widowed daughter-in-law.

German authorities organized periodic Aktionen to round up ghetto inhabitants and send them to their deaths. The mass murder of the Jews of Łódź that began with transports to the killing center at Chełmno swept up entire families. In some cases, older Jews were left behind. Suddenly they had no one left in the ghetto. This policy of annihilation tore families apart. Elderly Jews were often the targets of these actions, but in many cases older men and women were the ones left behind. Without family the aged were left lonely, isolated, and even more vulnerable.

Death of a spouse was particularly traumatic. In the wake of her husband’s death, Zysla Gotheiner sought shelter in a home for the aged. On 23 March 1942 Mrs. Gotheiner wrote that she was “completely alone” after the death of her husband. To further underscore her loneliness, Mrs. Gotheiner explained the absence of her two sons—one

221 Cytrynowski, I Will Remember, 259.
was living in Warsaw, the other she had not heard from since the beginning of the war. 222

Solitude was the central theme of her narrative.

Further investigation revealed that Zysla Gotheiner was not entirely alone. Also living in her apartment at Bier Straße 13 in the Łódź ghetto were her daughter-in-law, Margareta Gotheajner (nee Boas), her grandchildren, 10-year-old Horst and 8-year-old Ruth, and Margareta’s mother, 74-year-old Johanna Boas. In the absence of her sons and husband, did Zysla Gotheiner no longer feel welcomed by her daughter-in-law? Zysla Gotheiner’s situation exemplified the tenuous nature of family relationships that often left older men and women without support. Family tensions present before the war were exacerbated by extreme hunger, fatigue, and fear, all of which could easily fade into apathy.

Over time as individuals responded to increasing external pressures the family shrank into smaller and smaller units unable to sustain larger networks of intimacy. Even families that came together in response to German occupation, trusting the strength of family relationships to persevere, buckled under the pressures associated with years of subjugation and violence. Familial tensions devolved to the point that it was no longer possible to maintain multiple intimate relationships. But the roots of family resilience and conflict were firmly planted in the history of familial relationships before the war. The aged brought with them to the ghetto decades of family experience and interpersonal relationships that could help or hinder family responses to the effects of German persecution in the ghetto.

2.4 Reconfiguring the Family, Elderly Partnerships

Families succumbed to the extreme pressures associated with daily life in the Łódź ghetto. As individuals responded to hunger, crowded conditions, hard labor, and constant threat of death, families broke into smaller and smaller units of mutual commitment. For the elderly Jews, partnerships became the primary family unit. Older men and women found solace in a family partnership. This type of relationship offered comfort and a way to process the inexplicable surroundings of the ghetto. Partnerships provided older men and women with a sense of purpose that was less complicated than relationships of larger family networks. Marriage was the most common form of elderly couplehood. But less obvious partnerships, such as siblings and intergenerational relationships, also allowed the aged to reconfigure the “family” in the ghettos.

Marriage provided the basis of the most significant family partnership for elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto. In a time of great crisis two people who had often spent decades together, building a life and raising a family, turned to each other first for support. In some cases, marriage was the only chance the aged had for survival. The significance of this relationship was reflected in the lengths to which older couples went in order to stay together. Seventy-seven year-old Berl Lejb Kosowski and his wife were living in the old age home before the German invasion in September 1939. When the home was transferred to the ghetto in April 1940, Mr. Kosowski and his wife also moved to the homes in the ghetto. Only when Mr. Kosowski fell ill and could no longer stay in the home,223 did he go to live with his son. Upon his recovery in late April 1942, Mr.

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223 According to a report written by Josef Zelkowicz, at least one of the homes for the aged had an on-sight infirmary. However, anyone diagnosed with an infectious disease was not permitted to remain in
Kosowski petitioned for re-entry to the home because “naturally” he desired to be reunited with his wife.  

Gittel Feuer was also desperate to be “reunited” with her husband Salomon Jakob Gruenberg in the old age home where he was living. In her March 1942 letter to Rumkowksi, the 65-year-old Vienna native wrote that she had submitted multiple requests for admission to one of the homes. Mrs. Feuer was “lonely and sick” and hoped to join her husband, who had already been living in the home for two months.

One can imagine that the separation must have been particularly traumatic for Mrs. Feuer. She and her husband arrived in Łódź on 19 October 1941, on the seventh transport from Vienna.  

Separation was difficult, especially when one of the pair was admitted to one of the old age homes and the other left behind. In March 1942, sixty-five year-old Fajga Narzys pleaded with Rumkowski to allow her to join her husband Chaim-Josef in the old age home at Dworska 74. She was currently living with “foreign people” who treated her “terribly.”

Elderly couples acted as a unit and spoke with one voice. Dozens of older married couples approached Rumkowski for aid in a single appeal. Joint petitions were generally

the home. The report suggested that most were transferred to one of the ghetto hospitals. See Zelkowicz, Der tsam vaklt sikh.


written by men. On the occasion that the husband was too ill or frail, women also wrote appeals for the couple’s admission to one of the ghetto’s old age homes. When neither member of an elderly couple could write, they enlisted the help of a third party. The critical objective was that older couples stay together. Even if one spouse was significantly younger, perhaps even too young to be considered for admission to a home for older Jews, married couples insisted on staying together.

The sleeping arrangements of elderly married couples reflected the importance of intimacy and the desire to maintain the slightest amount of dignity. In overcrowded ghetto apartments people slept wherever they could lay their heads. Prewar expectations of privacy fell by the wayside, and the search for personal space was a never-ending endeavor. However, sleeping intertwined, even when extra space was available, continued to be common practice for older couples.

During his visit to the old age home on Gnieźnieńska Street, Josef Zelkowicz witnessed elderly couples sleeping together in a room filled with empty cots. Zelkowicz scoffed at this practice and chalked it up to habit. “Well, what should one do?—Difficult for the elderly to change a habit, which over many, many years has become second

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228 See, for example, Zysla Epsztajn to Rumkowski, Petition, 25 March 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 629-630.

229 See, for example, Gerer Hasidim to Rumkowski, Petition on behalf of Mendl Litvin and Wife, 30 May 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 580.

230 For example, Chane Fuchs was only 59 when she and her husband (ten years her senior) requested admission to one of the community’s homes. Abraham Fuchs to Rumkowski, Petition, 23 January 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 110.
nature.” Habit was only a partial explanation. What Zelkowicz did not recognize was the essential nature of this intimate act. Sleeping together, as many had done for decades, offered the most basic form of physical and emotional comfort, and also allowed couples to maintain the smallest amount of dignity—another scarce commodity in the ghettos.

Widows and widowers were commonplace in the Łódź ghetto. Although death was natural and expected in old age, the loss of a spouse in the ghetto was particularly traumatic. Confronted by an existence devoid of the familiar intimacy of marriage, older men and women were forced to reassess and redefine family. Older men and women who experienced the death of a partner after decades together were left feeling isolated and lonely. Sura Kempner’s reaction to her husband Martin’s death illustrated the intense loneliness felt by a widow. “Since I have been left here all alone,” the sixty-six year-old woman wrote, “I cannot take care of my needs all by myself and I miss my husband all the more.”

Death of a spouse often prompted elderly widows and widowers to seek solace in other family members and to attempt to reconstitute family units across generational divides. For instance, sixty-five year-old Henikh Frenkel hoped to “find peace” after the death of his wife when he moved into his daughter’s apartment. The respite provided by the new family partnership between Mr. Frenkel and his daughter was short lived. Mr. Frenkel’s daughter died and the elderly widower’s “last hopes were erased.”

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231 Josef Zelkowicz, “Zeks tsimern—zeks veltn,” 7 July 1942; Nachman Zonabend Collection, RG 241, Folder 861; YIVO.

232 Sura Kempner to Rumkowski, Petition, 19 October 1941. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 291.

remained the most logical and important constitution of family in the experiences of elderly Jews in the ghettos.

Elderly family partnerships took many forms outside of married couples. Older men and women created “families” by pairing up within and across generations. Co-residence of siblings was a common family form among elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto. Until early spring 1942, eighty-one year-old Freyda Szmelcmann lived with her sister, the elderly Mrs. Rosen.234 Georg Menke likewise lived with his sister in the Łódź ghetto. In October 1941 the 60-year-old Hauswächter [doorman/custodian] broke his leg and could no longer work.235 Mr. Menke understood the undue burden this placed on his sister, who was “herself in such a terrible economic situation.” Improving their economic situation was his ultimate goal. Through his earnings, Menke hoped, his sister could continue to take care of him.236 He seemed to be seeking stability through the recreation of prewar gender norms. Although he did not mind his sister “taking care” of his needs (the implication being that she fed him), he wanted to be the one to support the “couple” financially. His inability to work due to his injuries made him feel helpless. For the elderly, sibling “couples” could provide mutual support similar to that shared by married couples.

Even in the old age homes, elderly siblings clung to family bonds. Perhaps doing so brought a certain amount of comfort, a link to a previous life. Josef Zelkowicz


236 Ibid.
observed the intimate bond between two sisters in an old age home in July 1942. The two old women slept soundly, curled up on a cot together. One sister had her hand cupped firmly against the other’s ear and her mouth turned toward the second as if to tell her a secret. Zelkowicz’s guide, a nurse at the home, told him that the gesture was an old habit, second nature. One sister was “deaf as a post” but “nosy.” The other sister made sure that she did not miss a thing by constantly shouting the latest happenings into her ear. The scene Zelkowicz witnessed testified to the intimate bonds of elderly siblings. Sleeping just as a couple bound by marriage, the sister family confronted their fate intertwined and interconnected.

Siblings did not constitute the only elderly families. In a similar fashion, elderly parents and children formed partnerships of mutual protection. Circumstances in the Łódź ghetto posed distinct challenges to motherhood. Elderly mothers, just like their younger counterparts, attempted to fulfill perceived obligations to their children. Yokhet Voidislovski submitted an appeal for admission to one of the old age homes in the Łódź ghetto in 1940 that was strikingly similar to those submitted by elderly married couples. The 83-year-old woman petitioned Rumkowski for her admission and for the admission of her 60-year-old son.

In her appeal the old mother expressed deep concern for her son. Since abandoning his livelihood at the bookstore he had owned before the war, he had nothing to live for in the ghetto. Mrs. Voidislovski was looking out for her son’s well-being as

237 Zelkowicz, Zeks tsimern.

238 Yokhet Voidislovski to Rumkowski, Petition, 1940. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File, 267, Reel 90, 704-705.
much as her own. Her actions evidenced the notion that a mother’s instinct to protect did not wane with age.

Bonds created and sustained between grandparents and grandchildren were also important as older Jews re-imagined familial relationships in the Łódź ghetto. The relationship between Devorah Hannah and her grandson Leibeleh exemplified one of the outcomes to a familiar process in the ghettos—the atomization of the Jewish family. Bearing witness to this process, Zelkowicz described a family that had come together when the Jews of Łódź were forced into the ghetto. By the time of his visit the family had fragmented into autonomous units living side by side. Mutual bonds of commitment and affection that allowed Devorah Hannah to welcome her children and grandchildren home had since dissolved. Now adults tended to their immediate personal needs and the needs of their offspring.

Those without immediate family, Devorah Hannah and Leibeleh, were left to fend for themselves. As Zelkowicz wrote: “Devorah Hannah has no one on earth but Leibeleh, Leibeleh has no one on earth but Devorah Hannah, and the two together have absolutely nothing.” In these closing words Zelkowicz illustrated the process of fragmentation that Jewish families endured in the ghetto. Plagued by hunger, immobile due to paralysis, and neglected by other family members, elderly Devorah Hannah shared with her grandson the only thing she had to offer. In their nest of blankets in the corner of the family’s room, Devorah Hannah cultivated an intimate bond across the generations that afforded them both a measure of human dignity.

239 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 120.
2.5 Conclusions

As a lens for understanding how Jewish families responded to German persecution, age is critical. Inherent in growing old was a certain set of social and familial expectations distinct from other age groups. Conditions in the ghettos demanded that older Jews reassess and often re-invent definitions of the family. The physical, mental, emotional constraints of old age shaped elderly responses and also made them particularly vulnerable to persecution.

The experiences of elderly Jews challenged accepted notions of family experiences in the ghetto. Most analyses of family life during the Holocaust focus on the halting destruction of the nuclear family unit, composed of middle-aged parents and children. Beyond the traditional conceptions of the Jewish family, the responses of older Jews in the ghetto reflected different ways the elderly re-imagined and reconfigured family relationships. Partnerships became the essential family unit for aged men and women. The formation of new forms of families among older Jews in the ghettos refined conceptions of “ersatz” families in the context of camp life.

Placing age at the center of historical inquiry complicates notions of gender and the transformation of gender roles during the Holocaust. My study suggests that age shaped gender experiences. By interjecting the category of age, certain gender distinctions noted by historians of the family during the Holocaust persisted, but appear more muted. In later life men and women encountered a different set of social and cultural expectations concerning gender roles. Perhaps gender was less influential than age in shaping the experiences of elderly Jews. Further analysis of the elderly and their
experiences can only enrich our understanding of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust.

The interactions of older Jews with family members in response to German policies of ghettoization, forced labor, and systematic starvation in the Łódź ghetto resulted in new iterations of the family. Conditions in the ghetto exacerbated long-standing family conflicts and created new fault lines between family members. Older men and women stood at the center of these conflicts. The intimate relationships and mutual obligations that held families together dissolved, and elderly members were among the first to be excluded from the shrinking Jewish family. The process of atomization experienced by families in the Łódź ghetto contributed to the collective aging of the community as a whole. As a fundamental building block of Jewish society, widespread deterioration of the family translated to senescence of the ghetto community.
CHAPTER 3:
THE AGED AND THE COMMUNITY: INTERTWINED FATES

3.1 Introduction

In the Łódź ghetto aging Jews and the wider community depended on another for survival. Community acceptance was essential to the survival of aging Jews, especially the destitute among them. In turn, the older generation of Jews in the ghetto was fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of life beyond the mere act of physical existence. From May 1940 through May 1942, the inextricable link between the survival of the community and its elders found expression in momentous displays of sacrifice and solidarity. At the same time, the betrayals associated with the failure of either group to fulfill perceived expectations devolved into devastating moments of abasement.

The corrosive effects of German policies on Jews in the ghetto created an environment in which the bonds of the collective were stretched to the point of breaking. Older men and women unable to fulfill communal obligations became increasingly dependent on the generosity of the community. Constrained by lack of resources and overwhelmed by the sheer volume of need, the community also failed to meet the expectations of elderly members. Beginning in October 1941, German preparations for the murder of Łódź Jewry in the context of the “Final Solution” challenged the strength of communal bonds. The arrival of 20,000 mostly German-speaking Jews from western Europe intensified tensions between individual and collective survival strategies.
This chapter explores the influential roles of older men and women in the Jewish community in Łódź and demonstrates the vital nature of their individual contributions to the well-being of the community. Elderly contributions large and small to cultural activities, religious observance, and education lent an important element of continuity and generational wisdom to acts of amidah in the Łódź ghetto. Official institutions, organizing social structures, and small communal networks provided resources essential to lend elderly Jews necessary material, emotional, and psychological support. I argue that the implementation of the “Final Solution” in Łódź solidified the connection between older Jews and the community. Individual and communal responses to the influx of aging western Jews in autumn 1941 and the beginning of German Aktionen in the first months of 1942 escalated tensions in the ghetto community and revealed the first signs of collective aging.

3.2 Elderly Contributions to Amidah in the Łódź Ghetto

Older men and women in the Łódź ghetto helped to build a social infrastructure in the ghetto that established a semblance of normalcy. In return they benefited from the activities of broader social networks. Working in official and unofficial capacities, aging Jews attempted to preserve prewar social priorities and document the realities of the Jewish tragedy in Łódź. Educational, religious, and cultural activities enhanced the life of the Jewish community in Łódź and provided contexts for elderly survival.

Commitment to the education of Jewish youth in the ghetto was a priority for Rumkowski and much of the ghetto population. The process of aging and specific prewar experience put the elderly in a unique position to ensure the transference of secular Jewish education to younger generations. Dr. Abram Szalom Kamieniecki (b. 1 May
1874 in Slonimo) was a highly educated theologian and philologist.\textsuperscript{240} As an employee of the ghetto administration Kamieniecki first worked as an inspector and board member for the Department of Schools. In April 1942, Rumkowski transferred him to the Ghetto Archives where he wrote Polish-language entries for the daily chronicle. In both capacities Kamieniecki acted as a living connection between a rapidly vanishing prewar Jewish community and the hope for survival in a future community.

Samuel Lew (b. 1864 in Slonimo) was prominent in Zionist circles in Łódź during the interwar period, first as a member of the Lovers of Zion and as a co-founder (with Izrael Jelski) of the Jewish Territorial and Zionist Association. He worked with a number of groups to disseminate Hebrew language and literature and helped to establish the Hebrew Gymnasium (Jabne). He was a member of the Łódź Zionist Committee and in the late 1930s served as a member of the Zionist Organization Central Committee in Poland. He was imprisoned by the Gestapo for his activities in November 1939 and later released in January 1940.\textsuperscript{241} While in the ghetto he worked in the School Department. Lew’s work for the School Department shifted in September 1941 when Rumkowski delegated Lew (and two others) the task of clearing the schools of furniture and educational materials in preparation for the arrival of thousands of refugees from areas in

\textsuperscript{240} For more on Kamieniecki’s prewar activities and education see Oskar Rosenfeld, “Kamiencki, A.S. Dr.,” Ghetto Encyclopedia. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 1103, Reel 256, 124; Kempa and Szukalak, \textit{The Biographical Dictionary of the Jews from Łódź}, 120–121.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 153–154.
Western Europe. In May 1942 Lew was again re-commissioned by the Jewish leader as a member of the newly created board for child welfare.

Elderly Jews helped preserve Jewish cultural traditions in the ghetto as well. The Kulturhaus at Karwiecka 3 opened January 1941 and hosted its hundredth performance [Jubilaeumskonzert] on 31 December 1941. The Chronicle estimated that 70,000 people attended performances over the course of the year. In his diary, Vienna-native Oskar Rosenfeld recorded descriptions of cultural life in the ghetto. In a particularly moving passage he recounted a concert performed at the ghetto’s Kulturhaus located in a theater. Rosenfeld exposed the challenge and described the service of cultural activities in the ghetto. In his words the artists were “entrusted with the task, to provide, once a week, four hundred downtrodden souls with two liberating hours. In this sense, the cultural center brings honor to its name and mission.”

Elderly artists brought decades of musical experience to the ghetto stage to ease the suffering of the ghetto’s downtrodden. Teodor Henry Ryder (b. 10 June 1881) arrived in the ghetto with his wife in March 1940. Before the war, Ryder played piano in the Warsaw Opera and later served as the conductor of the Łódź symphony orchestra. Ryder and Dawid Bajgelman conducted a 44-musician symphony orchestra in the Kulturhaus

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244 Feuchert and Leibfried, *Chronik des Gettos, 1941*, 1:332, 350n93.

once or twice per week beginning in early 1941. Oskar Rosenfeld described Ryder in his account of a concert at the cultural house in the Łódź ghetto in June 1940:

He, Theodor Ryder, is the person said to be responsible for the Program. His heart seems to belong to Beethoven and the Romantics (Mendelssohn, Schumann, Schubert), although Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart are by no means neglected. If he had the music material available, he would no doubt also present Jewish music, pieces by Josef Achron, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, or even Eastern Jews who find their inspiration in the Jewish folk soul, like Weprik, Krein, Engel Rosofsky…But it is useless to dream of such possibilities, to harbor such illusions. Just as there are no eggs or lemons in the ghetto, there are also no musical notes, no instrumentation, no scores. Ryder conducts from a little hand score in which not all instruments, and therefore not all entries, are marked, but the orchestra functions with such precision that the few “pointers” with the baton suffice.

Rosenfeld was critical of Ryder’s choice of music for the performance and questioned the juxtaposition of such beauty next to the realities of ghetto life. However, he recognized the important service that Ryder offered the community. The elderly man, lacking the resources to which he was accustomed, drew on years of experience and conducted with such precision to lift the audience out of their misery. The cultural escapism Ryder and others offered brought “honor” to the Kulturhaus. His performance not only benefited the community. It was also an invigorating act for the old man.

246 For further information on cultural activities in the Łódź ghetto see Andrea Löw, Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten, Schriftenreihe zur Łódzer Getto-Chronik; (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 208–218.

247 Rosenfeld, In the Beginning Was the Ghetto, 80.

248 Perhaps the criticism is a reflection of generational difference. In her work on Theresienstadt, Anna Hájková argues that the classical music Ryder performed was passé. Anna Hájková, Prisoner Society in the Theresienstadt Ghetto (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2013), esp. Chapter 4, “Cultural Life in Terezín.”
Sitting in the audience Rosenfeld captured Ryder’s spirited movement on stage:

A man of advancing years, about sixty, with a lively face, bright sparkling eyes, and a gray goatee that bounces up and down coquettishly below his expressive mouth. His gestures are vivid, his arms have a wide reach, not like the so-called practical conductors who hold in their feelings and presume to take control of even a gigantic orchestra with short bobbing motions. With his back slightly bent, his legs spread apart, the agile, slender, little man bounces up and down as on a swing or—maybe more precisely—like someone who is himself a spectator who follows the rhythm of the music that is just being performed.

Cultural activities gave the ghetto community life. Ryder performed concerts for various sectors of the ghetto population including children and factory workers. Ryder’s concerts primarily focused on classical music. He teamed up with another man of his age cohort, Maurycy Mowsza Darguzanski (b. 11 March 1870), to establish the Hazomir orchestra in the ghetto.

The realm of cultural activities in the Łódź ghetto could be tendentious. Like all aspects of life in Łódź, cultural performances were subject to the approval of Rumkowski. Rumkowski’s authoritarian rule rested on draconian responses to the slightest deviations from his vision of order and production in the ghetto. Disapproval from the Jewish leader could have grave implications. In 1941 Rumkowski banned the elderly musician, 78-year-old Felix Halpern, from all musical activities in the ghetto.


251 Kempa and Szukalak, The Biographical Dictionary of the Jews from Łódź, 52. Darguzanski was born in Olkienki (near Troki) and came to Łódź before the war. He conducted choirs in Łódź synagogues, taught, and was an expert in Jewish religious music. He conducted mixed choirs in the ghetto, where he died on 3 May 1943.
because Rumkowski determined that he did not value Jewish music sufficiently. Unable to support himself with a job, the elderly man starved to death.\textsuperscript{252}

Religious life was another critical realm of influence for older Jews in the Łódź ghetto. The rabbinical board was made a department of the Jewish Council in July 1940 under the auspices of the Population Registry. It remained within the ghetto administration until it was disbanded and most of its members sent to Chelmno and killed during the \textit{Sphere Aktion} in September 1942.\textsuperscript{253} The assumption of the Łódź Rabbinate by Rumkowski’s Administration has been interpreted as a hostile movement on the part of the Chairman. The subordination of the governing religious body along with all other ghetto institutions allowed Rumkowski to consolidate control and extend his influence into all realms of ghetto life. Members of the Council of Rabbis were considered employees of the administration.\textsuperscript{254} They were authorized by the administration to perform weddings but were instructed to contribute monetary donations to the community treasury. They were permitted to hand down rulings in cases of Jewish law.

A number of elderly Rabbis served the religious needs of the ghetto community. Eliasz Josef Fajner was the assistant rabbi of Łódź,\textsuperscript{255} and head of the fifteen-member

\begin{thebibliography}{1}

\bibitem{252} Feuchert and Leibfried, \textit{Chronik des Gettos, 1942}, 2:58.


\bibitem{254} Members of the Rabbinic Council in the Łódź ghetto: Eliasz Jozef Fajner (b. 15 June 1867); Eliezer Lipschitz, Zelig Rozenshtayn, Moshe Weiss, Abraham Silman, Shmuel David Laski (b. 7 April/November 1897), Yohanan Lipschitz, Aaron Bornshteyn, Akiva Eiger, Elijah Flayshhaker, Simcha Bunim Aberboym, Nechemia Alter, Shlomo Jakubowicz, Moshe David Domb, and Hirshl Fishhof.

\bibitem{255} The head rabbi of Łódź, R. Simcha Treistman, left for Warsaw in winter 1940. However his title was not official because a head rabbi could not be decided upon after the death of Treistman’s father in 1921. For more on this leadership vacuum see Robert Moses Shapiro, “Jewish Self-Government in Poland: Lodz, 1914-1939” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1987), 301–305.

\end{thebibliography}
Council of Rabbis in the Łódź ghetto. Nechamia Alter (b. 16 September 1874 in Gora Kalwaria), a descendent of an old Hassidic family, was a member of the Rabbinic board in the Łódź ghetto. Mojsesz (Moszek) Dab (Domb) was born 7 January 1865. He was high in the rabbinic hierarchy before the war and served on the Rabbinical Council in the Łódź Ghetto. Symcha Binem Uberbaum (b. 14 July 1852 in Warsaw) was a Hassid from Aleksandrow and a leading member of the Jewish Congregation of Łódź before the war. While incarcerated in the ghetto he became a member of the rabbinical council. He died of a heart attack in the Łódź ghetto on 29 August 1942 at the age of ninety. His son, Ezra, also died in the ghetto, on 4 May 1940 at the age of sixty-nine.

From the beginning of the German occupation religious Jews, elderly men in traditional dress in particular, were targeted for public humiliation. Most religious life moved into the private sphere due to the material hardships of ghetto life and particular policies of the German and Jewish authorities. Regardless of the location of its practice, Judaism shaped the responses of elderly religious Jew and provided a framework for coping with daily suffering.

In the case of an aging family patriarch, religious observance offered an antidote to hunger in the ghetto. Yakov Eli described the strength he found in his religious tradition. In the chaos of being evicted from his house in spring 1940, he brought his Talmud as his only possession. Studying Torah allowed him to dismiss his corporeal needs. The old man maintained that he could live on only minimal nourishment. What
saddened him most was to see how the other members of his family succumbed to hunger. As they did so, they also grew lax in their observance of religious law.256

Devotion to religious life could also be a hindrance to older Jews who were so rooted in traditional religious lifestyles that they could not adapt to the new circumstances of life in the ghetto. Josef Zelkowicz described the particular difficulties of one elderly Hassidic couple. In his assessment the desperate circumstances of the Gledziner Rebbe and his wife were a result on their inability to break free of the structural confines of prewar Hassidic life. Before the war they had lived well off the contributions of the old Rebbe’s followers. The “geese and wine” they had received were now a thing of the past. No one had anything left to give them and they were barely scraping by. The couple’s recent poverty had devastating effects on their spiritual and corporeal lives.257

Planning, organizing, and implementing cultural and religious activities were a luxury that only those secure in their position in the community could take on. Preoccupation with food and work precluded most older men and women from such “extracurricular” activities in the Łódź ghetto. Nevertheless, older Jews in comfortable positions of influence saw it necessary to maintain some semblance of a social life in the ghetto.

Social organization managed by older ghetto elites served the community. In August 1940, sixty-four year-old Pinkus Gerszkowski (Bank Director) and 65-year-old

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257 Ibid., 76–84.
Benjamin Perelsztajn (a member of the Bank Administration) along with the much younger, but no less influential Szaja Kenigsberg, persuaded Rumkowski to open a kitchen for the intelligentsia of the ghetto community. Kitchen number 2 was organized and managed by 54-year-old Icek Jakob Fiszer. The Chronicle celebrated the service of kitchen number 2 in March 1941, crediting the elderly men with providing a noble service for the “almuni” [Ehemaligen] of the intelligentsia. The author of the entry recognized the services of the kitchen beyond its functional purpose of providing food. For Jews once “important” and now “excluded […] , declassed and pauperized,” the kitchen became a place reminiscent of a past life where they could exchange ideas and enjoy a “neatly decked table.”

The kitchen was a joint effort of the community and its founders. With financial backing from Rumkowski’s administration, the management of the kitchen was left to the “founders and initiators” of the project. The founders, including Gerszowski and Perelsztajn, organized cultural nights at the kitchen that featured artists and musicians. These cultural programs were multi-purpose. They raised money for the kitchen to serve more meals at reduced prices. In addition the programs supported artists in the ghetto and filled a void that had been left since the Kulturhaus at Krawiecka 3 had ceased to exist. Gerszowski’s prewar philanthropic endeavors provided the relationships and resources necessary to continue his involvement in social and cultural activities in the Łódź ghetto.

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258 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1941, 1:77–79.
3.3 Communal Aid for Older Jews

Efforts by Rumkowski’s administration to provide and maintain an old age home—a facility that housed a non-working adult population—suggested a more nuanced set of policies than implied by the emphasis on “salvation through work.” A close examination of the interactions between the Jewish leadership and the elderly population of Łódź revealed tensions between individual needs and collective demands. The old age home at Gnieźnieńska 26—its designation, management, resident experiences, and ultimate demise—provided a particularly instructive venue for understanding the complex and changing relationship between the Jewish leadership and one of the ghetto’s more vulnerable sectors of the society: the aged.

From the outset of the ghetto’s establishment, Rumkowski’s administration shaped the experiences of the elderly via a number of programs and institutions designed to alleviate the suffering of the aged in need. On 19 April 1940, just days before the Łódź ghetto was sealed on 1 May 1940, the Jewish Council took over management of the prewar old age home. The institution and its residents were transferred to a new location at Dworska Street 74, inside the confines of the ghetto.

In 1940 and 1941, Rumkowski commissioned annual reports from the Statistical Department detailing the activities and costs of the Dworska Street home. These reports are some of the few surviving sources that offer insight into the care of the elderly who
lived in this home.\textsuperscript{259} Over the course of the first two years of the ghetto’s existence the home housed an average of 178 people, reaching its peak of 230 residents in November 1941.\textsuperscript{260} Costs associated with the Dworska Street home rose steadily over the course of two years. The Judenrat paid 0.65 Marks daily per elderly resident in May 1940 and 1.77 Marks per person in December 1941.\textsuperscript{261}

In addition to the home at Dworska Street 74, the leadership developed programs of direct assistance to aid the elderly in need. Ghetto inhabitants over the age of 60 could apply to receive extra monetary aid from the Welfare Department of the Jewish Administration. In March 1940 the Provisioning Department set up a program to distribute extra dairy products to the elderly (and to children).\textsuperscript{262} In September 1940

\textsuperscript{259} The Statistical Department published two annual reports on the Dworska Street home. The first covered the residential composition and expenses from 1940, the second for 1941. Description of the reports: At the center of each report were a number of graphs representing the statistical data gathered by the Department. These graphs charted month-to-month changes in occupancy, personnel, and maintenance costs. In addition to the graphs, the Statistical Department included a number of pictures intending to represent life in the Old Age Home – pictures of elderly enjoying meals together, medical personnel attending to the sick, and elderly men and women participating in leisure activities. The annual reports revealed the amount of monetary resources designated by the Judenrat to run the home, the number of workers employed in the home, and the number of elderly served. The Department reported two classifications of elderly patrons – permanent residents [\textit{Ständige}] and so-called “boarders” [\textit{Kostgänger}]. From what I can determine, the difference between these two classifications was the difference between full-time and part-time residents, although it is not completely clear. And the number of “boarders” was not recorded after April 1941. There were typically approximately twice as many women residents as men during the two years reported. The departmental report also charted the number of sick residents in 1940 and the number of deaths in 1941.


\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{262} For more details concerning initiatives of the Provisioning Department see Isaiah Trunk, \textit{Łódź Ghetto: A History}, translated and edited by Robert Moses Shapiro, with an introduction by Israel Gutman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), 105n6, 7
Rumkowski secured a loan from the German authorities for two million marks.\textsuperscript{263} Beginning that month, under the auspices of the Department of Social Welfare, the Jewish Council distributed aid in graduated amounts based on age. Children up to fourteen years of age received 7 marks per month. Adults received 9 marks monthly. The loan also made it possible for Rumkowski’s Council to fund institutional care for needy children and elderly in the ghetto.\textsuperscript{264}

Food became a scarcer and more heavily regulated commodity as the ghetto approached the winter months. Rumkowski designed a new scheme to aid those Jews in particular need of welfare assistance for the period from 20 October to 1 December 1940. Elderly men and women were eligible for the most aid—10 marks for Jews over 60 years old; and 20 marks per month for elderly eighty years and older.\textsuperscript{265} In January 1941 assistance for the elderly was restructured. The new system designated 12 Marks for men and women in their sixties, 14 Marks for those in their seventies, and 16 Marks for elderly eighty years of age and older.\textsuperscript{266} During the first years of the ghetto’s existence hundreds of elderly ghetto inhabitants turned to these official channels of assistance to ameliorate the hardships of ghetto life.

\textsuperscript{263} More can be read about the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the Welfare Department (and the demise of the Department for Social Aid) in Trunk, \textit{Łódź Ghetto}, 59.

\textsuperscript{264} Rumkowski, Announcement 123, 20 September 1940; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 318; YIVO.

\textsuperscript{265} See Horwitz, \textit{Ghettostadt}, 99n18.According to Horwitz the new parameters were covered under an announcement entitled “Unterstützungsaktion,” signed by Rumkowski on 30 October 1940.

\textsuperscript{266} Rumkowski, Bekanntmachung Nr. 197, “Erhöhung der Unterstützung.” 17 January 1941; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG 241, Folder 318; YIVO.
Rumkowski’s administration developed policies and established institutions that gave space to and dictated the form of that relationship. Older men and women themselves further shaped the relationship by articulating their expectations through letters of petition. Petitions for admission to the old age homes in Łódź revealed three defining aspects of the dynamic connection between the leadership and the elderly. First, the relationship between the Jewish leadership in Łódź and the elderly was firmly rooted in a hierarchical social structure. The nature of this hierarchy determined a pattern of interactions and expectations. Second, older men and women struggled with the implications of aging in the ghetto. They developed strategies for survival based on rapidly diminishing autonomy and depended on community aid for survival. Third, the external and internal factors that shaped interactions between the leadership and the elderly were manifest in the establishment and management of the old age homes in the Łódź ghetto. Older men and women expressed an explicit will to survive and saw the homes as a place of refuge and salvation. Interactions between the leadership and the elderly in Łódź in the context of the home at Gnieźnieńska 26 indicated a broader interpretation of the “survival through work” strategy.

The process of applying for admission to one of the community’s home was similar to the process of obtaining monetary assistance from the community. Petitioners crafted letters stating the case of the interested party. In the case of applicants for old age homes in the Łódź ghetto, 528 petition letters survived in the documents of the Office of Eldest of the Jews. Petitioners crafted personal narratives that presented three general themes for appeal—personal destitution, communal contributions, and significant relationships. Some of the early letters also contained notes from an inspector sent to
substantiate the veracity of the applicant’s claims. Some petitions included letters of support or reference from community members—doctors verifying medical ailments, former employers attesting to prewar work, and neighbors purported to have influence.267

The language used by elderly applicants in their petitions revealed the dual nature of their expectations. The elderly recognized the hierarchical structure of the society in which they lived and their own position in that hierarchy. This recognition presented itself in the deferential language they used to appeal to Rumkowski for help. All petitions were addressed to Rumkowski using his official title across the top of the page. In its simplest form it read: “To the Eldest of the Jews of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto.” Petitioners frequently referred to the leader as “our father.”268 They described Rumkowski as a “benefactor,” “guardian,” and “protector of the elderly.”269 Implicit in this laudatory language and the process of submitting an application itself was the recognition of the ghetto’s social hierarchy. The elderly in the ghetto relied on official communal assistance to secure the means for survival. Their success depended in part on their ability and willingness to defer to Rumkowski’s leadership position.


268 See for example, Sime Sternfeld to Rumkowski, Petition, 22 July 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 550-551.

Although deference to the leadership was common among petitioners, such language should not be misconstrued as evidence that elderly Jews passively awaited judgment from the leadership. Petitioners used the opportunity afforded by the process of applying for aid to convey the belief that the leadership of the community was obliged to care for the elderly in this time of severe peril. According to 75-year-old Icek Biedak, who submitted a petition for admission to the homes in September 1941, this demand was “nothing extraordinary…nothing impossible.” The majority of elderly petitioners juxtaposed deferential language with subtly demanding requests. This form of communication suggested that older men and women recognized their vulnerability and their dependence on the Jewish leadership but at the same time signaled their expectation that it was the community’s duty to care for older men and women in need.

An internal struggle specific to the process of aging also influenced the pattern of interaction. Petitions written by the elderly revealed a deep internal contest between the desire to maintain one’s independence and self-sufficiency and the recognition of one’s growing dependency on outside help. Physical and mental decline were part and parcel of the process of aging even in the best of circumstances. The process of losing one’s independence was a natural part of the aging process and under any normal circumstances it was difficult to confront and navigate. The hunger, disease, poverty, and constant threat of death that characterized life in the Łódź ghetto only compounded the problems of aging.

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270 Icek Biedak to Rumkowski, Petition, 18 September 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 303-304.
The act of submitting an application in and of itself was an admission that the applicant could no longer support him or herself. Requesting residence in one of the two old age homes in Łódź was a last resort. Most applicants had exhausted other avenues of support. Seventy-four year-old Rubin Pomerants worked as a wooden shoe specialist in one of the ghetto workshops in order to support himself and his ailing wife. When Pomerants fell ill as well, he had to quit his job because he could not complete the work in his weakened physical state. In his application on 11 April 1942, Rubin Pomerants requested admission to the old age home. In the Łódź ghetto a person’s autonomy, self-worth, and often life itself, was contingent on the ability to work. While some elderly people, like Pomerants, did hold jobs, advancing age and physical frailty combined with the harsh physical conditions of ghetto life, meant most older men and women were unemployed.

Dependence on the community had particularly deadly implications for elderly men and women. Herein lies the particularly tenuous position of the elderly in the community. German authorities led the Jewish leaders to believe productivity would ensure the survival of the community. Based on that ruse, Rumkowski developed policies that privileged the young and able-bodied. Demanding that ghetto inhabitants work, Rumkowski set out to prove the worthiness of its population to the German authorities. Unable to work and acutely aware of the danger this posed to their survival, the aged developed a strategy that mirrored Rumkowski’s approach. Elderly petitioners asked for pity, but more important they outlined myriad reasons why they were worthy of benefiting from Rumkowski’s social welfare programs. Even more than being “worthy”
elderly petitioners sought to convince Rumkowski of the community’s obligation to the older generation.

Prewar activities, a source of pride among the elderly, were offered up as evidence of their worth. A lifetime of working in and giving to the community set them apart from other applicants for services, and from the younger ghetto population. Although their wartime experiences might seem banal in light of thousands of similar stories of loss and personal tragedy, older men and women had spent decades building the community that was now under attack. They had built, managed, and labored in factories; created and nurtured new generations; committed time and money to charities; led synagogues, cultural events, and social activities. They were, in a sense, the foundation of the community and presented themselves as such in their requests for help.

Henikh Frenkel’s personal suffering was not unlike that of many petitioners. In March 1941, Frenkel found himself “miserable” and “alone” after the death of his daughter, his only child in the ghetto, and his wife. He described the “bitter” and “difficult” fate of being left with no one to care for him. In addition to describing his familial loss, Frenkel also emphasized his service to the prewar Jewish community of Łódź. He described himself as “one of the most active members” of the old age home’s administration before the war.\(^\text{271}\) Frenkel hoped to be repaid for his commitment to the community via admission to one of the old age homes.

Bina Silberspitz requested admission to one of the old age homes on behalf of her 71-year-old father Henoch in September 1941. She also emphasized his long commitment

to the community before the war. Henoch Obaszanek had spent fifty years as a weaver in Łódź. Obaszanek lived with his daughter in their apartment in the Baluty section of the city for thirty years where he had become a fixture of the community. According to his daughter, Henoch was “known as a respectable man,” 272 who was “well liked by everyone.” 273 Destitute and desperate Henikh Frenkel and Henoch Obaszanek appealed to Rumkowski for aid.

Petitions became an exercise of proving one’s worth to the community and served the additional purpose of allowing older men and women to reclaim their autonomy. Many applicants, including 69-year-old Adele Gliksman, attempted to retain their self-sufficiency as much as possible. In her letter of petition, Gliksman requested help but promised not to be a burden to the community. She offered to bring her own bed, dishes, and sheets to the home. Gliksman, who claimed to have relatives throughout the world, offered to repay Rumkowski if and when she received the aid her family had promised to send. 274

In his petition from 16 April 1942, Mojsze Lajb Grohman made a brief statement about his condition—he was “alone” and “exhausted”—and ended with a list of all of his worldly possessions: “one bed, bedspread, and sheets.” Grohman promised to bring these


273 Silberspitz to Rumkowski, Petition for Henoch Obaszanek, 10 November 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 345.

274 Adele Gliksman to Rumkowski, Petition, 27 February 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 63. Adele Gliksman to Rumkowski, Petition, 29 March 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 70. Petitioners frequently offered to repay the community when they found the opportunity. See for example, Katherine Alex to Rumkowski, Petition, 28 October 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 251.
items so that he “would not become a burden to the home.” Still other applicants pledged their labor skills. Hinda Frajman, a self-described “spry” older woman, offered to trade accommodation in the home for her work in the kitchen. And 67-year-old Roza Bruzdowa even offered to work in the home without pay so that she might feel “worthy.” Older men and women felt compelled to demonstrate their worth and assuage any fears that they would further burden the community.

These petitions were emblematic of the tenuous position of the elderly in ghetto society vis-à-vis the leadership. On the one hand, older men and women emphasized the obligation of the community to care for them. On the other hand, they felt the need to prove that they were worthy of such care. In particular elderly petitioners reiterated time and again that they would not be a burden to the community. Imbedded in the pleas of the aged was the tacit understanding that their worth in ghetto society was determined by their own ability to contribute.

The homes for the aged in Łódź provided a venue for understanding the relationship between the elderly and the Jewish leadership during the first years of the ghetto’s existence. Building on prewar traditions and responding to wartime circumstances, the leadership created and maintained a space that attempted to appease elderly desires for salvation. In turn, the aged in the community expected a refuge in their

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276 Hinda Frajman to Rumkowski, Petition, 30 May 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 440-441.

time of need. Rumkowski’s Department of Social Welfare was able to meet and even exceed these expectations in the months before late summer 1942.

A description of the home at Gnieźnieńska 26 and its amenities survived in the richly detailed essays written by Josef Zelkowicz after his visit to the site in July 1942. Zelkowicz described in great detail the lengths to which the leadership went to create a refuge for the aged of the Łódź ghetto community. In the complex at Gnieźnieńska 26 elderly men and women had shelter and their own place to sleep. The home provided meals from a “real kitchen,” baths with running water, laundry services, and an in-house infirmary. In addition to facilities to meet the basic needs for survival and hygiene, the complex housed a number of extra amenities for its elderly residents, including a barbershop and a shul with all the “necessary ritual objects.” Staff was available around the clock to aid residents with whatever problems arose.

In one of his essays, Zelkowicz led his reader on a personal tour of the Gnieźnieńska Street home for the aged. During this tour we get an idea of the costs associated with initial preparation and maintenance of the institution and the amenities provided to ensure the health and even comfort of its residents. Essentially, Zelkowicz gave his readers an idea of the ways in which the budget allotted for the home by the Jewish Council translated into the reality of care for the elderly.

The Gnieźnieńska Street home contained over 100 rooms. Two-thirds of the rooms were designated as residential space for its 277 residents. Activities in the

278 Josef Zelkowicz, “Zeks tsimern—zeiks veltm…(anndrukhn fun a bazukh in moyshev-skeynim af der Gnezner gas),” 7 July 1942; Nachman Zonabend Collection, RG 241, Folder 861; YIVO.

279 Zelkowicz, “Geshmadn un gehangen,” 7 July 1942; Nachman Zonabend Collection, RG 241, Folder 861; YIVO.
remaining rooms were dedicated to the “maintenance of the institution.” Touring these rooms, Zelkowicz wrote that one came to appreciate how much “energy, patience, good will and business know-how” were put into the administration of the Home.

In Zelkowicz’s descriptions of the various rooms throughout the house, hygiene was highlighted as a primary concern. At the outset, a lack of running water caused many difficulties for the institution. But this was not unusual. About 95 percent of the apartments in the ghetto (30,624) did not have toilets, running water, or sewage. The Gnieźnieńska old age home also encountered this problem. In order to provide water for the kitchen, the bathing facilities, and the in-house laundry, the administration decided that it was not practical to hire people to haul water back and forth from the well across the street. Thus, the administrators of the home ran a water pipe from that well to provide running water to the facility.

Zelkowicz emphasized the significant advantages of ensuring the home had running water. He reported that in the kitchen everything was cleaned until it sparkled. The laundry room ensured that residents had clean clothes and bed sheets. And residents could use the eight showers and two bathtubs to bathe as often as they liked, but at least once per week when baths were required.

Zelkowicz reported that the home on Gnieźnieńska Street also provided some special amenities. In addition to clothes being washed regularly, they were dried, pressed, and mended as needed. When clothing was worn out, residents only had to request clothing from the supply room. There was a hairdresser on the premises. Zelkowicz

280 Ibid.

281 Zelkowicz, A Bruise and Welt in Every Home.
wrote: “Each of the pensioners can come in, when his heart desires, it is possible to get cut, shaved, and he need not even give a tip and, if he doesn’t want to – he doesn’t need to say ‘thank you very much.’”

The Gnieźnieńska Street Home housed a shul for prayer services and Torah study. Zelkowicz’s description of the shul, the piety of its attendees, and his encounter with the “baptized Jews” (converts to Christianity) there offered insight into religious practices in the ghetto as well as commentary on the perceptions of Christians who had been designated as Jews and incarcerated in the ghetto. Also present in the home was an infirmary with its own doctors, nurses and ambulance. There non-infectious patients were treated, and those with more serious conditions were transferred to the ghetto hospital. Each of these services ensured that the elderly residents maintained the healthiest and most comfortable existence possible given the circumstances of ghetto life.

The petitions reflected the refuge that the leadership attempted to create. Many petitioners perceived admission to an old age home as the only means to evade death. Rachel Zychlinska, a frail, old woman of 71 years turned to the administration of the old age home out of desperation in April 1942. Zychlinska explained that after her husband died of hunger a few months previously, she was “completely abandoned.” She had no means to take care of herself and feared death would come quickly if she were not given a place in the old age home.

Echoing the desperation and fear in Rachel Zychlinska’s application was Ita Dratwa. According to her petition Dratwa was a “sick, helpless” old woman. She lost her

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282 Zelkowicz, Zeks tsimern.
sons at the beginning of the war and had been living with a stranger, who could not take
care of her. Turning to Rumkowski as her last hope, Ita Dratwa pleaded for admission to
the old age home, which she insisted would be her only “salvation.” Desperation,
loneliness, and fear of death were common themes in the petitions. Such sentiments
indicated that the applicants were no longer able to provide for themselves and often
seemed resigned to the idea that admission to one of the homes was their only hope for
survival.

Whereas some applicants focused on an imminent death if left to their own
devices in the ghetto, others emphasized the life-giving possibilities of the homes for the
aged. Seventy-five year-old Rywka Nowtony hoped to be placed in the old age home so
that she “could continue to live.” Another woman, seventy-six year-old Brandla
Senator, wrote in her March 1942 application that admission to the old age home would
allow her to “live again.” Senator’s application, and those like hers, suggested that
admission to one of the old age homes did not necessarily mean a loss of independence
but was also a way for older men and women to take control of their own fate.

The most common sentiment expressed by applicants was the will to survive. In
March 1942, Jakob Josef Schefner pleaded with Rumkowski to grant him and his wife,
Liba Brana, a place in one of the old age homes. He wrote: “In order to keep us alive and

283 Ita Dratwa to Rumkowski, Petition, 8 December 1941. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel
90, 217-218.

284 Rywka Nowtony to Rumkowski, Petition, 29 January 1942, USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267,
Reel 90, 153-154.

285 Brandla Senator to Rumkowski, Petition, 20 March 1942, USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267,
Reel 90, /109.
to free us from our plight, please admit us to the old age home.” Elderly applicants for
assistance frequently used the term “salvation” in reference to the homes. They equated
the homes with safety and comfort. In his February 1942 petition, 65-year-old Michal
Piechota hoped to escape debilitating hunger by finding refuge in the one of the old age
homes. In large letters at the end of his request, the elderly man pleaded with
Rumkowski: “SAVE ME!”

The concept of a refuge in the ghetto proved to be an illusion in the end.
Zelkowicz picked up on this fact in his description of the wobbly fence that surrounded
the site. Disillusioned residents were known to leave the homes. Deaths were noted in the
ghetto Chronicle. During its tenure the Chronicle reported the tragic fate of many aged
Jews who left the “refuge” of one of the homes. On 1 December 1941 the Chronicle
reported: “Yesterday at approximately 4 o’clock in the afternoon 65-year-old Szmul
Funkensztajn was found frozen to death in the cemetery. The deceased was a resident of
the old age home, who left on his own accord on 24 November.”

The elderly in Łódź perceived the homes as a refuge—a place where they could
receive a warm meal, get to know other older people, and live out their old age with

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286 Jakob Josef Schefner to Rumkowski, Petition, 8 March 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File
267, Reel 90, 81.

287 Michal Piechota to Rumkowski, Petition, 2 February 1942. USHMM RG-15.983M, File 267,
Reel 90, 140-141. (Emphasis in the original)

288 Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried, and Joerg Riecke, eds., Die Chronik des Gettos
Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1941, vol. 1 (Goettingen: Wallstein, 2007), 277.

289 Unknown author to Rumkowski, Petition, 5 June 1942. USHMM RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel
90, 25.

The majority of the applications revealed a struggle—the desire for help, an admission of diminished independence, the guilt of being burdensome, and the need to maintain a sense of self-worth. The ability to prove one’s worth was critical to have even a chance to survive in the Łódź Ghetto. The process of determining who was worthy of life and who was not constituted the core of the relationship between the Jewish leadership and the elderly in Łódź.

When reading the petitions of older men and women, one is struck by the laudatory language employed by elderly petitioners in their quest for assistance and specifically the flattering tone petitioners used to address Rumkowski. They referred to him as a “benefactor”, a “guardian,” and a “protector of the elderly.” He was often described as “honorable,” “noble,” and also “humble.” The gratitude and deference to his authority was persistent. For example, 75-year-old Sime Sternfeld opened her petition in July 1941 with the following words: “I received aid from the noble Präses in the amount of 10 Marks – I thank you from the bottom of my heart. As a sickly old widow I ask you “our father” […] to admit me to the old age home.” Similarly, 66-year-old Dina Berlinski opened her petition: “Dear Herr Präses, father of all children, orphans and

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elderly people, I turn to you with the humble request that I be taken into the old age home
[...]

At first glance this language seemed perfunctory—a rhetorical flourish of sorts. In fact, as historian Isaiah Trunk astutely noted, many Jews used a “sycophantic tone of flattery” when addressing Rumkowski. The language of these petitions was shaped by Rumkowski’s demands for deference but it also served a real and practical purpose. In fact, elderly flattery was a necessary means to an even more crucial end. Elderly petitioners trusted that utilizing deferential, even sycophantic language would aid their requests. Unable to work and acutely aware of the danger this inability posed to their survival, the aged utilized flattery as a way to gain Rumkowski’s favor. If flattery and over-the-top expressions of gratitude were more than merely cursory, what exactly did it allow elderly petitioners to do in their letters? And why was it a necessary tactic in negotiating their survival?

The laudatory language adopted by elderly men and women in need provided a safe space for leveraging more critical demands of the leadership. Flattery lent petitioners a rhetorical haven within which they could voice their frustrations with the process of obtaining sufficient aid and outline their arguments about the obligations of the Jewish leadership to the elderly in the community. It was clear from the content of these petitions that while deference to the leadership was common among petitioners, such language should not be misconstrued as evidence that elderly Jews submitted petitions and then passively awaited judgment from the leadership. In cases when requests were not fulfilled

in a timely manner, petitioners submitted multiple applications. In some cases a second application included even more praise for “The Chairman” than the initial attempt at obtaining admission to one of the homes had.

A striking example was evident in the petitions of Helena Lipschitz. At almost 70 years old, Helena Lipschitz submitted her first letter of petition on 14 September 1941. Mrs. Lipschitz was very matter-of-fact about her condition. She described her situation in the following terms:

I am a solitary and frail woman. I live off of social aid and have no other means of subsistence. Unfortunately, I don’t see well and am reliant on others. I would appreciate if my request could be fulfilled as soon as possible because the winter is approaching and I could contract an illness in my cold apartment. [...] With this I hope that my request will be fulfilled and thus, my life will be saved.

She mentioned Rumkowski only one other time in her initial request.

Mrs. Lipschitz’s second letter from 29 September 1941 began by pointing out that she had already submitted multiple requests but they had remained unanswered. The second letter was almost identical to the first with a few significant additions. In her follow-up request Mrs. Lipschitz used phrases that emphasized her acknowledgement of and submission to Rumkowski’s authority. She used the phrase, “my dearest Herr Präses,” twice as many times in the second petition, and at the end of her letter she added

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a paragraph to express her advanced gratitude and indebtedness should her request be fulfilled. The increased use of praise in the second letter suggested that Lipschitz considered this tactic necessary to persuade Rumkowski to help her survive.

The use of praise and flattery may have allowed petitioners to address their concerns to Rumkowski, but it could not obscure the very real fears that plagued the elderly in the Łódź ghetto. Beneath all of the rhetorical praise and gratitude expressed for the Jewish leadership in the Łódź ghetto was a critical subtext that revealed the nature of the relationship between Rumkowski’s Jewish Council and the elderly—specifically the elderly in need. Petitioners attempted to convince Rumkowski of his obligation to the aged, despite his policies to the contrary. At the same time they struggled between admitting dependence and maintaining some sense of self-worth.

3.5 Preparations for the “Final Solution” Challenge Perceptions of Community

The policies and resources of the community faced unexpected challenges in October and November 1941, when the leadership in Łódź was forced to accommodate the arrival of 20,000 “foreign” Jews sent from Germany and German-occupied territories west of Poland. In September 1941 Himmler handed down to Gauleiter Greiser, whose district held the city of Łódź, the decision that Jews from areas in Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia would be transported east.297 This decision represented a critical step in the Germans’ “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” and

297 For more on the circumstances of this decision and its connection to German victories during the war, see Peter Witte, “Two Decisions Concerning the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’: Deportations to Lodz and Mass Murder in Chelmno,” Holocaust and Genocide Studies 9, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 318–345n70.
resulted in the expulsion of approximately 20,000 Jews to the Łódź ghetto in October and November 1941.298 (The plan demanded that the western Jews would spend the winter in the ghetto and be deported the following spring.)299 About one-third of the Jews arriving on these transports in Łódź were 60 years of age or older; more than half were over fifty years old. In a matter of weeks the 60+ population went from a little less than 13,000 to more than 19,000 people. As a result Rumkowski’s Judenrat faced a difficult decision: How could the ghetto accommodate the new population? And, in particular what would become of the sizable population that was mostly unfit for work—the cornerstone of Rumkowski’s strategy for keeping the ghetto alive? The effort was a valiant one considering the high mortality rate of the newly arrived Jews from the west.300

Tensions that arose between native and non-native Jews were symptomatic of a community at varying stages of disintegration due to the pressure of German occupation

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298 See Horwitz, Ghettostadt, 134. Horwitz outlined the gender and age breakdown: “From October 16 to November 3 came four shipments from Berlin, five from Vienna, five more from Prague, two from Cologne, and one each from Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, and Luxembourg. In all 19,953 persons—8,263 of them male and 11,690 female, with 10,661 of the total over the age of fifty—were uprooted from their former lives, loaded onto trains, transported east, and abruptly deposited in a distant ghetto in the unfamiliar landscape of central Poland.”

299 Himmler to Greiser: “The Führer wishes the Altreich and the Protectorate to be cleared of and freed from Jews from West to East as soon as possible. Consequently, I shall endeavor, this year if possible, and initially as a first stage, to transport the Jews of the Altreich and the Protectorate to those Eastern territories which became part of the Reich two years ago, and then deport them even further eastwards next spring. My intention is to take approximately 60,000 Jews of the Altreich and the Protectorate to spend the winter in the Litzmannstadt ghetto which, I have heard, still has available capacity. I ask you not only to understand this step, which will certainly impose difficulties and burdens on your Gau, but to do everything in your power to support it in the interests of all of the Reich. SS-Gruppenführer Heydrich, whose task it is to carry out the transfer of the Jews [Judenwanderung], will contact you in good time, directly or through SS-Gruppenführer Koppe.” Qtd. in Witte, “Two Decisions Concerning the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’: Deportations to Lodz and Mass Murder in Chełmno,” 333n73. Himmler to Greiser, September 18, 1941, BA, NS 19/2655, printed in, Die Ermordung der europäischen Juden. Eine umfassende Dokumentation des Holocaust 1941—45, Peter Longerich in collaboration with Dieter Pohl (eds.) (Munich: Piper, 1989) doc. 60, 157.

300 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1941, 1:300.
and persecution. The home began as a solution to the dramatic influx of elderly Jews who arrived in the ghetto in October and November 1941. It remained a location for encounter between these two populations in the ghetto from its existence from December 1941 to September 1942. Tensions between the “foreign” and “native” populations came to a head in May 1942.

In response to this influx of refugees, Rumkowski designated a new home for the aged at Gnieźnieńska Street 26 in December 1941.\(^{301}\) The four-building complex sat at the end of the street, near the ghetto fence, in the far western corner of the ghetto. The home represented an attempt at communal cohesion. The Judenrat in Łódź devoted precious resources to accommodate a “foreign” population that did not fit into its primary strategy for survival—labor. From the time it opened in December 1941 until July 1942, the home housed nearly 1200 elderly men and women. Most of what we can learn about the home comes from a series of essays written by Josef Zelkowicz after his visit to the home in July 1942.

Josef Zelkowicz was a writer and an astute observer of ghetto life. He worked for the ghetto archives and was a contributor to the daily chronicle in the Łódź ghetto.\(^{302}\) In essays about the home at Gnieźnieńska 26, he reflected the Jewish administration’s pride in the accommodations they were able to procure to house the newly arrived foreign Jews. One of his essays was effectively a tour of the home. It served to demonstrate the lengths to which the community went to house the elderly men and women. Zelkowicz

\(^{301}\) Feuchert and Leibfried, *Chronik des Gettos, 1941*.

\(^{302}\) For more on Zelkowicz’s biography see, Unger’s introduction to Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days*, 11–18.
wrote that if one understood all that was invested to bring the institution to fruition, one would notice the amount of “energy, patience, goodwill, and business know-how” that was used to make the complex on Gnieźnieńska Street a suitable place for the elderly refugees to live.\(^{303}\) To be sure, the old age home did seem to provide much better accommodations than the alternative for the Jews arriving from the west.\(^{304}\) Most were housed in so-called “collectives” where people slept on the floor, sometimes twenty to thirty people in one room. They had very few toilets and rarely enough water.\(^{305}\)

Although the Jewish administration considered the home itself an accomplishment, there remained a mutual sense of skepticism between the native Polish Jews and the newly-arrived, mostly German-speaking Jews living in Łódź. The Polish side of this complex encounter was evident in Zelkowicz’s essays on the home. In his first essay, “Der tsam valkt zikh [The Fence Wobbles]…,” Zelkowicz wrote about the plight of the “foreign” Jews with great sympathy. He described the situation of the elderly men and women among them with particular compassion. The “foreign” Jews arrived in the ghetto as “beggars.” They were forced to leave everything they knew behind—relatives (both living and deceased), property and most of their possessions. Most did not possess the language or the cultural wherewithal to communicate

\(^{303}\) Zelkowicz, Geshmadn un gehangen.

\(^{304}\) Zelkowicz described the conditions as “immeasurably better” in his essay “The Case of Rosa Steiner.” See Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 293.

\(^{305}\) For more on the conditions in the “collectives” see, Trunk, Lodz Ghetto, 297–298.
effectively. And, as Zelkowicz noted, circumstances demanded that they “extend their hands for relief.”

Whereas the younger deportees could manage to cope in their new surroundings, the elderly were less likely to adapt. Zelkowicz offered an example. A younger man could trade his coat for some bread to combat nagging hunger. This was not, however, a viable option for an older man. According to Zelkowicz, “to sell his warm clothing means to sell his life…” The implication was that the physical frailty that accompanied old age made these men and women more vulnerable to the depraved conditions they encountered in the Łódź ghetto.

The compassion Zelkowicz conveyed for the “foreign” Jews in the beginning of his series of essays was tempered by his less sympathetic betrayal of the population living in the home in subsequent reports. At various points he referred to them as “lazy,” “childish,” and “naïve.” He made a marked distinction between the foreign Jews living at Gnieźnieńska 26 and the Polish Jews he considered his own. According to Zelkowicz: “The ‘foreign’ Jews are an entirely special element, altogether different from us, domestic Jews.” He claimed that the Polish elderly were simply happy with room and board; they had no complaints. The foreign Jews, in contrast, were needy and full of complaints. The competing characterizations of the older German-speaking Jews whom Zelkowicz met during his visit to Gnieźnieńska 26 revealed the reporter himself to

306 Zelkowicz, “Der tsam vaklt zikh…(anydrukhn fun a bazukh in moyshev-skeynim af der Gnezner gas),” 7 July 1942; Nachman Zonabend Collection, RG 241, Folder 861; YIVO.

307 Zelkowicz, Der tsam vaklt zikh.

308 Ibid.

309 Ibid.
be a middle-aged man with his own preconceptions about the haughty
Bildungsbürgertum and disdain for the pitiable nagging of the aged German Jews in the
home.

Such skepticism was mutual. The newcomers were horrified by their surroundings
in the Łódź ghetto. Oskar Rosenfeld, who came to Łódź in a transport from Prague,
described the scene he encountered upon his arrival:

[...]Through dung and morass, the march went to somewhere. Curiosity seekers lined the streets of a rundown, sparsely
developed area, impossible to say whether it was a city or village... [...] Carts, small carriages, drawn by young and old
people rather than animals, were met along the way. Dreary mud
huts...Helpless trees and shrubbery...pools of sewage...stinking
refuse...countless tired, cooked creatures...Amidst them faces that
had already overcome all misery, in which was written: We’ll
persevere, we’ll survive you, you cannot destroy us...shabby
sundry stores, taverns, coffeehouses, cigarette vendors, young girls
and children who were selling something or other, the smell of
things unknown in the West, young people in uniform with Zion
stars on their arms, screams amidst the silence, above it all a fog-
grey sky, traversed by raven-like birds. This was the criminal
quarter of Łódź, the ghetto of Litzmannstadt.310

For the newcomers the reality in occupied Poland was wholly disorienting. Still used to
home-cooked food and other creature comforts from their former lives, in the beginning
they scoffed at the meager portions of thin soup that passed as food in the ghetto. The
deportees from the west quickly realized that the material conditions they had left behind
in Berlin, Vienna, and Prague were far superior to those they faced in the Łódź ghetto.

Such sentiments have been echoed in postwar assessments of the encounter
between eastern and western Jews in the Łódź ghetto. Historian Isaiah Trunk attributed

310 Rosenfeld, In the Beginning Was the Ghetto, 12–13.
the inability of Jews from the Reich to adapt to their new environment in Łódź to the near impossibility of fostering solidarity in such conditions. Although his analysis was externally focused, his assessment of the Reich Jews was devastating:

By its very nature, the ghetto of the Hitler era was not a place prone to create solidarity or mutual understanding between two so immensely diverse groups [native Jews and Jews resettled from the Reich], with misery the only link between them. Only those expellees sensitive to the Jewish catastrophe, to the obliteration of their Jewish and human philosophy, could feel the urge to rapprochement with the culture and way of life of Eastern European Jews, and to bring about a return to their ethnic roots. The majority, elderly people of long-established habits, life philosophy, and manners, were unfit for such a far-reaching transition. Almost all maintained a passive attitude toward life and the conditions they faced in their new environment, where bitter fate now forced them to live. Instinctively, they defended themselves against identification with indigenous ghetto inmates, trying to separate themselves by all means from the ‘natives’ in the belief that this might save them from submerging into the mass of the ghetto population. [...] The situation became even more acute during the ‘resettlements’ in Lodz in May 1942 and later, from June to August 1944, when Central European Jews went obediently to the assembly places, still nourishing the illusion of eventual return to their former homes where, they hoped, conditions would be more favorable for survival.311

Oskar Rosenfeld lamented the desire among “foreign” Jews in the ghetto to remain separate. Prejudices and language barriers made integration difficult. Perhaps to combat the disorienting nature of their new environment, elderly “foreign” Jews desired to live together. The Old Age Home at Gnieźnieńska Street 26 provided that opportunity. Even the German Jews who had been living in Poland since before the creation of the ghetto sought the company of the other German Jews. In a petition to Rumkowski from January 1942, Dora Gross, a 68-year-old widow originally from Danzig, explicitly

requested admission to the “German old age home.” Such a request was not uncommon for those seeking comfort in the company of people with similar backgrounds.

3.5 Survival of Foreign Jews

Survival strategies available to the elderly foreign Jews were limited. The best chance for the survival of the western Jews in the Łódź ghetto and the Łódź community was a thorough process of integration. Zelkowicz described the older German, Austrian, and Czech Jews who arrived in the ghetto in October and November 1941 as being at a particular disadvantage. Those who could parlay their prewar training into a purposeful activity in their new environment had a better chance of integrating into the fabric of the ghetto community.

Professionals and artists had more success gaining entrée into the community through their work. Rudolf Bandler (b. 5 March 1878) was an opera singer born in Rumburg in Bohemia. A performer in Vienna, he moved his family to Prague after the Anschluss in March 1938. He was sent to the Łódź ghetto on 26 October 1941 with the third transport from Prague. From 3 March 1942 he lived at Franciszkanska 109 with Elisabeth Lilly Bandler (b. 20 January 1901) and Susann Bandler (b. 5 May 1924). He performed at the House of Culture in the ghetto. Oskar Rosenfeld described one of Bandler’s performances and its effect on the audience of 400 people:

314 Ibid.
“[...] A singer still demands to be heard. Rudolf Bandler of Prague is one of the most popular. His deep baritone leaves room for the murky as well as the grotesque and the burlesque. He sings aria from Italian operas, he sings them in an enthralling Italian parlando, and when he sings a ballad by Löwe or a Schubert song, then even the souls born in the ghetto feel as if they were at home, remembering perhaps the poetry of Schiller and Heine, which, as is well known, had been some of the favorite verses among the Eastern Jews until their own, Yiddish literature pushed aside these German poets.”315

Rudolf Brandker was able to bridge the cultural divide. In turn he was accepted into the ghetto community.

A number of older men and women made significant contributions to the established health care institutions, cultural projects, and administrative departments in the Łódź ghetto. Dr. Phil Karel Bondy (b. 2 September 1882) arrived in Łódź as a refugee from Prague. He came to the ghetto with the second transport from Prague in October 1941. After his arrival he became the leader of the 2nd Prague collective (Rybna 10?) and eventually manager of all of the transports from Prague. He was appointed director of the “Deportees Department,” which was charged with the task of finding accommodations for the newly arrived western Jews. Bondy’s contemporaries deemed him “highly valued for providing care for deportees.”316 On 1 November 1942, Rumkowski appointed Dr. Bondy director of the women’s section of the Ordnungsdiens. The Frauenpolizei were charged with the task of supervising children in the ghetto, in particular those whose

315 Rosenfeld, In the Beginning Was the Ghetto, 81.

parents worked in the ghetto factories. After the women’s police force was disbanded he was transferred to section three of the *Ordnungsdienst*.

“Native” Jews made room for the newly arrived in their cultural and social circles. The *Kulturhaus* compiled lists of the artists in the ghetto. In December 1941 Rumkowski ordered the operators of the *Kulturhaus* to create a list of all artists who had recently arrived in the ghetto from western Europe. This list did not survive the war, but transport records revealed many aging artists from the *Altreich*, including the well-known Zionist portrait artist Robert Gutmann from Vienna. The original fifteen members of the ghetto Rabbinate welcomed four new members from Berlin and Hamburg. Welcoming the “foreign” Rabbis legitimized the place of the newcomers in ghetto society. It should be noted that three of the four men, though transported from their homes in Germany, had been born in areas of Eastern Europe.

### 3.6 Collective Senescence Begins

Just months after the newcomers from the west arrived in the ghetto, German authorities initiated plans for the annihilation of Jews living in the Łódź ghetto. Over the course of 1942, German officials ramped up the speed and scope of the “Final Solution”

### Notes


318 The editors of the German-language edition of the *Chronicle* compiled a list of western artists that arrived in the Lodz Ghetto based on transport files. See Feuchert and Leibfried, *Chronik Des Gettos, 1941*, 1:434n50.


320 Ernst Beer (b. 26 February 1881, deported from Berlin), Chaim Moses Josef Feldman (b. 20 August 1899 in Husiatyn/Kopyczynce, deported from Berlin), Mojszesz Petrower (b. 17 June 1878 in Sighet, deported from Hamburg), and Dr. Salomon Markus (b. 27 June 1874 in Krakow, deported from Hamburg).
and implemented two phases of *Aktionen* from the Łódź Ghetto to the death camp at Chelmno in the context of *Aktion Reinhard*.\(^{321}\) Between January and May 1942, German authorities removed approximately 55,000 Jews from the ghetto. The three phases of targeted round-ups served as a direct assault on the ghetto community.

Rumkowski designated a committee of ghetto officials to compile a list of names of people to be summoned for transport out of the ghetto. Sara Goldman received a summons [called “wedding invitations” in the ghetto] from the Evacuation Committee that obligated her to report to the collection point on 27 January 1942. Desperation took hold of the entire community from 19-29 January when transports of 1,000 Jews left daily for an unknown destination. Not knowing where to turn for help, 80-year-old Sara Goldman penned a petition letter to Rumkowski on 26 January, requesting admission to one of the community’s old age home so that she could be exempted from deportation. Mrs. Goldman’s desperate act was too little, too late. Rumkowski’s office received the letter on 28 January. Written twice in large letters and underlined across the top of Mrs. Goldman’s neat penmanship is the designation: “out of date.”\(^ {322}\)

Individual acts of desperation intensified as 34,000 ghetto residents received summons to report for deportation in the second phase of the *Aktion* from 22 February through 2 April 1942. In March 1942 the *Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto* collected a list of those ghetto inhabitants who attempted suicide during the time of “general despondency

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\(^{322}\) Sara Goldman to Rumkowski, Petition, 26 January 1942. USHMM, RG-15.083M, File 267, Reel 90, 177.
and panicky mood” that preceded the beginning of deportations from the ghetto. The majority of the people mentioned in the entry arrived in Łódź on one of the many transports from the west only five months previous, and many were elderly. The Chronicle offered an insight into the social responses to suicide: “The motivation for suicide remains unknown.” As if abject poverty, relentless hunger, and threat of expulsion to unknown destinations were not reason enough to justify suicide.

Tensions between native and foreign Jews in the ghetto came to a head when the final phase of the Aktionen in early 1942 targeted western Jews. Rumkowski’s announcement on April 18, 1942 originally exempted the “newly arrived” Jews from this round of deportations. But a subsequent announcement on April 29 shifted the target of the deportations from the native ghetto population to the western Jews. At the end of April, the Chronicle reported the reactions of the western Jews to the announcement. There was “immense bitterness,” resentment stemming from the widespread opinion that the western European Jews were being sacrificed to save the native population.

Although presumably not a popular opinion among those targeted for deportation, an anonymous observer of the situation (presumably also an evacuee from the west), justified Rumkowski’s decree:

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323 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:74.
324 Ibid., 2:75.
325 Announcement no. 380.
326 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:139–140.
327 Isaiah Trunk guessed that this anonymous author was Oskar Singer.
An opportunity to kill two birds with one stone has come to hand for the chairman in the new outsetting in May: To measure out equal justice to both sides and get rid of an unproductive human element. Although in principle no distinction is made, the psychologist must understand: the resident is a real brother, the new fellow—a step-brother. He does not even understand the language of the ghetto. Moreover, there coincided here the high percentage of older people and such whose possibilities of adapting were hopeless...If it came to an outsetting of only residents, then the chairman would have to target his productive elements. ... Who can be offended at a good father, when he spares with all his strength his favorite child. ³²⁸

This observer suggested that Rumkowski’s decision was logical in light of his survival strategy for the ghetto. He could get rid of the “step-brother”—the western European Jews, most of them elderly and unfit for work—and retain the “real brother”—the native Polish Jews, whom the observer assumed were younger and able-bodied.

In response to the announcement, some western Jews scrambled to find the necessary means to procure an exemption. Employment was one guarantee for exemption, but this option did not apply to most elderly men and women, especially those living in the old age home. Veterans of the First World War, who had been wounded or received the Iron Cross, were also exempt from the deportation. This category had the potential to include many elderly men and their families. However, in reality, it did not help, as most western Jews had been forced to leave behind proof of such honors when they departed for Łódź.

As the transports started on 4 May 1942, older men and women were forced to call on outside connections to save them. Very few were successful in obtaining an

exemption. Many even volunteered for deportation because they did not want to part from family members and did not believe that their destination could be worse than the conditions in the ghetto.

In the days leading up to the removal of western Jews in May 1942, many older men and women took their own lives rather face an unknown fate. The Chronicle reported dozens of suicide attempts made by elderly living at the Home for the Aged at Gnieźnieńska 26 and in the collectives. Authors at the Chronicle were able to offer some explanations. The 60-year-old Julia Baum from Frankfurt am Main hanged herself in the collective at Zgierska 70 on 4 May 1942. “Reason: Fear of Evacuation.” On 1 May 1942, Ryszard Izrael a 66-year-old from Vienna took his own life out of despair. The Chronicle reported the motivation for his desperate act: “Reason was anxiety over the loss of his wife, who died the night before.” The report in the Chronicle did not seem to understand the motivations of those who committed suicide. For others, taking control over one’s fate seemed like the most logical last act of human dignity, especially for the elderly.

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329 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days.

330 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:146.

331 Julis Borhard, 75, Neustadt; Irma Teresa Sara Lewental, 60, Frankfurt am Main; Ida Fischer, 73, Vienna; Aliza Borman, unknown, Frankfurt am Main, Wiktor John, 72, Vienna; Julius Berhardt, 75, Vienna, Ruszard Izrael, 66, Vienna; Julia Baum, 60, Frankfurt am Main are just a few of the German-speaking Jews who were recorded as having committed the ultimate act of desperation.

332 Feuchert and Leibfried, Chronik des Gettos, 1942, 2:147.

333 Ibid., 2:142.
3.7 Conclusions

So few of the elderly Jews from the Łódź ghetto survived to recount their experiences. As the petitions reflected, however, death was not a fate they passively accepted. Older men and women in need sought the aid of the leadership in hopes of ensuring their own survival. The particular vulnerabilities of advancing age and physical frailty demanded that older men and women rely on the support of the wider community when they could no longer procure the means to care for themselves. The process of admitting need and reaching out for help was a complicated one that demanded a reassessment of one’s own worth and had even greater implications in a society that privileged productivity.

A confluence of external factors and internal expectations defined the relationship between the elderly population and the Jewish leadership in Łódź from 1940 to 1942. At the core of this relationship was a delicate balance of demands and expectations set out by both parties. Older men and women recognized their reliance on the goodwill of the leadership but also found subtle and more explicit ways to appeal to the leadership’s obligation to care for the very people who had founded the community. For as long as possible, throughout the first half of the ghetto’s existence, the community responded with a well-organized and operated system of institutional care for the elderly.
CHAPTER 4:
THE SHPERE, THE ABYSS

4.1 Introduction

Following the establishment of the curfew [Shpere in Yiddish; Gehsperre in German] on 5 September 1942, Jews in the ghetto were confined to their rooms. Restricted to smaller venues of social interaction—housing blocks, apartments—people focused on smaller units of social organization—friends and neighbors, and families. It was within these small places and narrow circles that the inhabitants of the ghetto witnessed and experienced the onslaught of the next week, as Germans, initially working through the Jewish police, tore 16,500 children, women, and men away and dispatched them to their deaths.\(^{334}\) Public and private reactions collided in paralyzing grief. Elemental bonds that tied the community together were broken.

The round-ups and transports to sites of mass killing that made up what is almost always referred to as “deportations” were public processes, and public reactions were common. But grief is a solitary emotion. And ultimately everyone is alone in death. This chapter opens with a sketch of the Shpere Aktion: how did it begin, what transpired? What roles did the Jewish police play, and at what point and in what ways did Germans

\(^{334}\) The exact number of Jews murdered during the Shpere Aktion in Łódź is unknown because sufficient documentation did not survive. Isaiah Trunk proposed this number to account for the total number of people sent out the ghetto to Chelmno in addition to the hundred killed in the ghetto during the Aktion. See Trunk, Lodz Ghetto, 245–247.
intervene? Then I shift focus to the private sphere to examine elderly reactions and efforts to evade, control, or confront the onslaught of destruction. Finally, I expand the gaze seeking to understand the impact of individuals and their deaths on the wider community.

What remained of the ghetto after the murderous events of September 1942?

The older generation—the “superfluous” inhabitants of the ghetto—was the trunk of the Jewish community (to borrow an image from Josef Zelkowicz), the metaphorical, physical, spiritual connection between the roots and the branches. After the *Aktionen* of September 1942 the ghetto was no longer a living community. The ghetto was transformed into a work camp. Stripped of the living connection to its past, of its spiritual, cultural, and familial leaders, the group of Jews left in Łódź was suddenly much closer to death, the result of rapid, collective aging.

The *Shpere Aktion* culminated in the murder of 16,500 Jews and accelerated the process of forced senescence in the Łódź ghetto. The announcement on 4 September that all Jews under ten and sixty-five years of age and over would be rounded up in the coming days was met with panic and grief. Immediate reactions were shaped by survival strategies cultivated in the first two years of the ghetto period. The events of the *Shpere* and the reactions of elderly Jews in particular revealed the shortcomings of individual and communal strategies for survival. As Jewish police and German authorities made their way through the ghetto from 5-12 September, house by house and street by street, victims and their families began to recognize the futility of survival attempts. The

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335 Zelkowicz used a variety of metaphors to discuss the destruction of the Jews in the Łódź ghetto. During the *Shpere Aktion*, he utilized the corporeal metaphor employed by Rumkowski in his “Give me your children” speech on 4 September. In this context the victims of the *Aktion*—the elderly, children, and infirmed—were the severed limbs sacrificed to save the Jewish body. In reference to the aged in particular, Zelkowicz described older men and women as the “trunks” that sprouted family trees.
ruthlessness and inconsistency that marked selections revealed the exact nature of Nazi ideology in practice. Shifting concepts of age dictated who would live and who would die. The physical, emotional, and psychological trauma of those left behind found expression in a process of forced collective senescence.

4.2 Sources

By necessity the source base for this chapter is narrow. The kinds of records that attest to Jewish agency and strategies of survival in the ghetto—the petitions and reports submitted to and generated by the Jewish Council, for instance—are not available for studying this concentrated period of destruction. There are a few eyewitness accounts of events within the ghetto from 5-12 September 1942, and these are central to the discussion here. The diaries of Dawid Sierakowiak, Oskar Singer, Josef Zelkowicz, and Oskar Rosenfeld are the heart of this chapter. Less extensive descriptions in the ghetto Chronicle and subsequent memory texts add other perspectives and valuable detail.

Neither contemporary sources nor postwar memoirs and testimonies describe what happened next to those Jews removed and murdered in nearby Chełmno. The total number of survivors of that killing center can be counted on one hand. The general problem of finding sources about aged Jews in the Łódź ghetto is exacerbated here,

336 Scholars are only beginning to explore in depth the interrelated development of German plans to annihilate the Jews of Europe, the creation of the killing center at Chełmno, and the evolution of events in the Łódź ghetto. See two recent works: Shmuel Krakowski, Chełmno, A Small Village in Europe: The First Nazi Mass Extermination Camp (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); and Patrick Montague, Chełmno and the Holocaust: The History of Hitler’s First Death Camp (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
because elderly and children were the primary targets of the murder Aktion. Contemporary sources, though few, are essential to analyzing the immediate effects of the Shpere on the Jewish community in Łódź.

4.3 Preparations for the Shpere

On the afternoon of 4 September 1942 Rumkowski outlined the horrific nature of German demands to a panicky crowd that had gathered in the center of the ghetto. The following day the ghetto would be placed under a general curfew until further notice. During that time Jewish police would carry out orders handed down from German authorities that demanded removal from the ghetto of all children up to age ten and people sixty-five years and older. The German quota was set at 20,000 people.

The announcement was met with audible shrieks and cries of horror. Rumkowski begged for compliance. He insisted that he had done what he could to negotiate with the Germans. Ultimately, if the Jewish police were unwilling, the Germans would intervene with more terrible consequences for the community. Taking away the children and the elderly was horrendous and unbearable but, Rumkowski insisted, necessary for the survival of the whole. Rumkowski likened the operation to a life-saving amputation: “I must perform this difficult and bloody operation—I must cut off the limbs in order to save the body itself!”

Rumkowski’s speech only confirmed rumors that had spread through the ghetto during the summer of 1942. Remnant populations from towns in the surrounding Warthe

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337 For an English translation of the speech see Berenbaum, Witness to the Holocaust, 84–86.

338 Ibid., 85.
region had arrived in the Łódź ghetto between January and June 1942 after local German authorities in those areas carried out orders to destroy smaller ghettos, kill “unproductive elements” of the population, and concentrate the surviving Jews in larger ghettos. The “newcomers” in the ghetto testified to the brutality and anguish they suffered, having witnessed the murder of their families and destruction of their communities. The Chronicle noted an atmosphere of increased fear and anxiety in Łódź in response to the horrific tales the new ghetto residents brought with them. Especially fearful were “mothers, sisters, and grandmothers” upon hearing about the round-ups of children and elderly Jews in Pabianice.

Rumors about a looming crisis persisted through the summer. Speculation about new round-ups to target children under ten years old was widespread by the end of June. The ghetto Chronicle reported that the rumors originated from the fact that Biebow had ordered Rumkowski to compile a list of children for statistical purposes. The sense of foreboding grew in July when ghetto residents learned that certain hospitals were to be closed and turned into workshops. Patients were to be transferred to the new barracks under construction next to the Radogoszcz rail station. The extent to which Łódź ghetto inhabitants believed widespread rumors and testimonies from other towns in the

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339 See Statistics Department, “Eingesiedelte aus dem Wartheland, 1 January – 30 June 1942”; Nachman Zonabend Collection; RG241, Folder 800; YIVO. In the first half of 1942, 7,649 Jews between the ages of one and ninety arrived in the Łódź ghetto from Zgierz, Pabianice, Löwenstadt, Osorkow, Belechatow, Zelow, and a number of other smaller villages.


summer of 1942 is impossible to ascertain. The uncertainty that pervaded the community was in part due to debates within the German hierarchy.

The fate of the Łódź ghetto had yet to be decided by German officials as of late July. On 26 July, head of the Ghettoverwaltung Biebow declined work orders placed by a German electric company to be filled in ghetto workshops. Biebow cited uncertainty about the future of ghetto workshops in light of an impending resolution to the Jewish question.³⁴³ Local and regional officials remained in negotiations with the central authorities until late August. Biebow and Greiser had a vested interest in keeping ghetto workshops running considering the potential for personal profit. They faced fierce opposition from SS leader Heinrich Himmler, who was eager to quicken the pace of the “Final Solution” in the Wartheland. Not until late August did German officials reach a compromise. The ghetto would remain for the time being, but all “unproductive elements” would be removed. German authorities acted swiftly once the decision was made to murder the children and elderly of Łódź.

The atmosphere of anxiety was a symptom of an unraveling community. In the summer of 1942, the ghetto witnessed an increase in crime. The elderly were not immune to its effects. In one of the few cases of murder in the Łódź ghetto, aging women acted as both perpetrator and victim. On 21 July 1942, sixty-five year-old Mirla Gertner brutally murdered her longtime neighbor, fifty-five year-old Chana Rosenblit. The German Kripo and Jewish Ordnungsdienst determined that the motivation was hunger and envy. The psychological effects were devastating for Gertner, who eventually confessed to the

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Ordnungsdienst. Gertner was arrested and incarcerated by the German Kripo along with her husband, who was considered an accomplice for not reporting the crime. Gertner was institutionalized in a psychiatric ward and her husband died in custody.  

Daily tensions that arose in the Łódź ghetto came to a swift halt on 1 September when Jewish police raided the hospitals on Wesoła, Drewnowska, and Łagiewnicka Streets. Hearing of the news, frantic people raced toward the hospitals. Crowds that gathered assumed patients were being transferred to the newly erected barracks near Radogoszcz train station. They were quickly disabused of those assumptions when they witnessed the brutality with which Jewish police threw the sick into carts. This behavior confirmed that all of the rumors of the last two months were true.

By late summer 1942, the Jews of Łódź had no doubt about the true meaning of “evacuation” [Aussiedlung in German; oyszidlung in Yiddish]. In the days leading up to the curfew, ghetto inhabitants expressed their fears in private writings. The young diarist Dawid Sierakowiak commented on 3 September 1942:

In the evening disturbing news spread that the German had allegedly demanded that all the children up to age ten must be delivered for deportation and, supposedly, for extermination. The situation in the ghetto is very much like the one in all the surrounding towns prior to deportations there, with the difference being that there the deportations were sudden and unexpected, while here they are being arranged with the most sophisticated premeditation.

Did Sierakowiak know that the Jews rounded up in the following days were to be murdered? His qualification of ghetto rumors in his diary leaves room for interpretation.


345 Sierakowiak, *Diary*, 214.
However, the entry testified to the existence of knowledge and debate among the residents of Łódź.

By 2 September ghetto inhabitants knew the basic parameters of the coming Aktion. That day David Sierakowiak commented on the prevailing atmosphere in the ghetto after evacuation of the hospitals the day before: “The mood in the ghetto is panicky; everything’s in suspense, and everyone’s waiting.”346 On 4 September Rumkowski announced that the Evacuation Committee would draw up lists based on the biographical information obtained from house registration lists. Children up to age ten and older people sixty-five and above were to be removed. Jewish police forces would carry out the process of rounding up people to fill the 20,000 person quota.

The Evacuation Committee [Oyszidlungskomisye], first established in January 1942 to aid Jewish and German officials in the first phase of round-ups in the ghetto, was reconvened. The five-member commission was led by the director of the Department of Vital Statistics (Neftalin), the commander of the ghetto police force (Rosenblatt), the chairman of the ghetto court (Jakobson), director of the ghetto’s central prison (Greenberg), and director of the investigative branch of the Jewish police (Blemer). The

346 Ibid.
Commission worked through the night to compile a list of people to be removed from the ghetto. The list only contained 13,000 names. What accounted for the difference? The absolute number of elderly and children did not add up to 20,000. But many people that fell into these age categories were left off the lists due to personal connections. *Protekcja* would save them.

Indeed *protekcja* saved the lives of parents and children related to the men charged with carrying out German orders. But other ghetto residents had to be rounded up in their place to fill the German quotas. Age remained the primary criterion for selection although definitions shifted. When making selections in the moment, Jewish police and German authorities relied on subjective definitions of age. Ghetto residents who looked old or weak were taken despite their dates of birth.

### 4.4 Reactions to the Announcement, Relying on Previous Survival Strategies

When Rumkowski finished his speech and news of the impending *Aktion* travelled through the ghetto, residents jumped into action. Panic ensued in the wake of Rumkowski’s speech, which had made German demands clear for all those ghetto residents still unconvinced. Dawid Sierakowiak described the resulting scenes in his diary:

> The panic is incredible. Nobody’s working anywhere; everyone’s running to secure work assignments for those in their family who are unemployed; parents of the unfortunate children are trying to save them by any means. The Registration Office was sealed after the lists were made, so that all rescue attempts by falsifying birth
certificates, registration books and other documents, or making up certificates, etc. are failing.\textsuperscript{347}

Elderly Jews like most others relied on past experience, which led them to believe that proof of work could save them. A barrage of people attempting to correct or alter their ages in the population registry bombarded the office of the Evacuation Committee at Koscielna 4 on the eve of the \textit{Aktion}. Oskar Singer described the results:

An extraordinary trek to the Registration Office began. Scenes transpired in the office for the registration of deaths that no tragic playwright could reproduce. The officials tried to get control of the situation. They worked day and night. The press of people from the counters to the desks continued to grow. The petitioners screamed, wept, and raged. Every second could bring a judgment, and entire hours passed in a struggle with their unbound passions. Everyone sought a protector in order to make it up to the desk that would save them. New papers, passports, and identity cards, genuine and fake, were to prove that the child was older, the old person younger. To find one’s way in this chaos took the effort of a titan. Already on Saturday the Gestapo was at work, but without interesting themselves for the feverish efforts going on at Koscielny-Platz 4. Everyone assumed that the Ordnungsdienst failed. They should not have to do the work of the hangman on their own.\textsuperscript{348}

Aging Jews no doubt waded into the desperate, writhing mass of people at the registration office. The crushing mass would have been particularly difficult for the aged and frail to navigate.

Desperate people also flooded the Labor office. Elderly and children who had not worked up to that point attempted to get an employment identification card or a

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid., 215.

“Rumkowski Rest Pass” to ensure an exemption from deportation. Throngs of people turned away, dejected when they learned that both the Labor office and the Vital Records Department had been closed in anticipation of such desperate efforts. It was not clear that a work permit would be of any help, especially for people who because of advanced age had not worked up to that point. But people clung to the hope that work permits could save them. Zelkowicz noted that: “No one knows whether this would be of any use, but everyone has a demand and wants something to cling to. For this very reason, this absolute lack of information, any paper may be useful.”349

Oskar Singer noted the problems associated with many people’s attempts to change the records:

It was to be expected that under these circumstances parents and relatives tried to get children’s ages corrected. There were reasons for the errors and inaccuracies that had been introduced up to this point. That which today had the right to exist could have fatal results tomorrow. There was a tendency to raise the age of the children, because children over ten had to work and as a result would receive soup. Other parents reduced the age, because a younger child could have a chance for a ration of milk. Yesterday soup and milk were of decisive importance; today it was a question of life. The ages of old people were also adjusted for various reasons.350

Singer’s observations revealed the rapid shift of fate that occurred when the parameters of the Shpere Aktion were announced. Overnight and without advance warning the categories that had entitled Jews to further aid in the weeks and months before September 1942 suddenly condemned them to an unknown but certainly terrible fate.


350 Singer, Im Eilschritt durch den Gettotag, 136.
The social welfare system created in the ghetto had given incentives for people to claim that they were older or younger than they actually were. The program of graduated monetary assistance instituted in January 1941 was a particular boost for residents in the advanced stages of life. As Singer indicated, stretching the truth about one’s age was understandable. Discovery of such a white lie nevertheless elicited shock. In March 1941, the *Chronicle* had reported about the scandalous claims of a “resourceful old woman”:

A certain Mirla Dancygier in pompous style presented the Chairman with a request that she be allowed to reach her … hundredth birthday. The petitioner, or so she claimed in her submission, had happily already reached the age of 97. As the oldest inhabitant of the ghetto she was counting on the Chairman immediately to order that she receive additional food rations, “for the sake of humanity and pity for an old woman.” This remarkable request takes on a rather different flavor when one realizes that, after some investigation, it became clear the petitioner had taken the initiative to add an entire 18 years to her actual age. In order to live!³⁵¹

In 1940 and 1941 old age could be advantageous. Old age could mean greater financial support and increased food rations. Any advantage disappeared overnight in early 1942. The Evacuation Committee used chronological guidelines to fulfill German demands, but fell short of the number stipulated. The difference between the German quota and the Jewish list—approximately 7,000 people—demanded a shift in the criteria for selection. This number left room for the employment of more subjective criteria for defining “old.”

4.5 The *Shpere Begins*

During the *Shpere Aktion* in September 1942 in the Łódź ghetto, German authorities co-opted the help of Jewish policemen and firefighters to assist in the removal of more than 16,500 ghetto inmates. The vast majority of people seized for deportation and death were under the age of ten or over the age of sixty-five. The percentage would have been higher, but ghetto leader Mordechai Rumkowski procured exemptions for the children and elderly parents of Jewish policemen and firemen in order to ensure their cooperation. Not only were Jewish organizations forced to participate in the destruction of their own community, but the Germans targeted ghetto institutions previously thought to be places of refuge. Jewish policemen raided the old age homes on Dworska and Gnieźnieńska Streets on 5 September 1942, the first morning of the *Aktion*.

The round-ups of elderly Jews began by targeting groups that had already been isolated from the community on multiple levels. The homes for the aged were located at the periphery of the ghetto, on dead end streets, away from main thoroughfares. The residents who occupied the homes had already been separated from family. Whether by choice or by way of forced circumstance, the aged Jews living at Dworska 74 and Gnieźnieńska 26 had few, if any, connections beyond the walls of the institutions that housed them. Josef Zelkowicz’s account made it clear it was no coincidence that the round-ups started in the old age homes:

> It has begun! Now the Jewish police have gone into action. To gather experience in this work, they began with the weakest link, the one that cannot put up even the slightest resistance—the old age home. There, as they say, the table’s been set. Everything can be taken as is. No need to be selective. Everything is old and fit to be “thrown on the garbage heap.” This really is the point of least resistance. After all, who will come to the old folks’ assistance? Who
will say a word on behalf of old people who have been living on the kehilla’s mercies for weeks, for months? Who will defend the “foreign” elderly on Gnieźnienska Street, who have neither a relative nor a savoir to shed a tear for them? No one can help them but themselves. But the old people can hardly emit a groan, which anyway goes unheard and surely cannot move the ossified hearts. […] In the old-age homes, the policemen can work in a calm and businesslike way. No one disturbs or annoys them; there are no mistakes…

The decision to target the old age homes to round up the first victims of the Aktion was logical. As Zelkowicz noted, the Jewish policemen in charge need not worry about confronting resistance in these institutions. In many ways the residents of the homes had already been removed from the smaller social units that kept them connected to the community. Zelkowicz’s observations, while shrewd and haunting, reflected the confluence of ideological categories that ordered life in the Łódź ghetto. For Zelkowicz the first elderly victims of the Shphere were the helpless and hopeless members of a class of Arbeitsunfähig die living on borrowed time.

Round ups made outside of communal institutions were much more emotional. Police encountered distraught families that desperately clung to vulnerable members in a last ditch effort to evade capture and deportation. Zelkowicz likened these confrontations to a crude form of amputation:

Here, husbands are torn away from wives and wives from husbands—couples that for forty or fifty years of hardship and joy, of children born and lost, had almost been one body. After they came to the ghetto, one of them endured better than the other. The husband resembles a townsman; his wife has surrendered her human visage. Or the other way around; she is still a proper Jewish matron, good for

various tasks in the ghetto, while he cannot put one foot in front of the other. He or she is sentenced to be thrown on the garbage heap.\textsuperscript{353}

Zelkowicz’s astute observation touched on the particular suffering of older men and women during the \textit{Aktion} in September 1942. Decades of common experience, of failures and successes, of tragedy and joy, of the banalities of everyday life forged a bond so intimate and intricate for older couples that two individuals became one. The elderly lacked the innocence observed in so many child victims rounded up during the \textit{Aktion}.\textsuperscript{354} Beyond the violence inflicted on individual victims, Zelkowicz indicated the broader effects. Removing elderly men and women from their families was akin to dismembering the community.

4.6 Involvement of the Jewish Police

The Germans coopted the Jewish leadership and police to carry out \textit{Aktionen}.\textsuperscript{355} Zelkowicz described the ghetto policemen as having “ossified hearts,”\textsuperscript{356} indifferent to the plight of the people they were pursuing and rounding up for death. He expressed a bit more sympathy for the Jewish police when he compared their actions in the \textit{Shpere

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 303.

\textsuperscript{354} Zelkowicz noted the inability of “nabbed” children to make sense of the circumstances. See Zelkowicz, \textit{In Those Terrible Days}, 307.

\textsuperscript{355} See Bauman, \textit{Modernity and the Holocaust}. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of a “save what you can” strategy employed by Jewish leaders is particularly instructive in understanding the flawed logic in Jewish responses to German policies. Bauman argued that the deceitful, bureaucratic structure of Nazi persecution allowed for Jewish leaders in the ghetto to be pulled into the German machinery of destruction. Jewish leaders believed that they could make decisions that would influence the fate of the Jews in their care and therefore developed a pattern of response based on the notion that sacrificing sectors of the ghetto population would ultimately ensure the survival of most Jews.

\textsuperscript{356} Zelkowicz, \textit{In Those Terrible Days}, 303
Aktion to the conduct of German authorities who intervened on the second day of the curfew. Zelkowicz was brutal in his accusations of the betrayal carried out by the Jewish police and "White Guard." He saw them as complicit in the murder and terror of the community. He did not mention, nor seem to sympathize with the justification of Jewish volunteers who felt compelled to do anything in order to save their own family members. Zelkowicz believed that the extra food rations were the motivating factor. Although this point seems logical, surely the ability to save family members was a key factor in the decision to help round people up: a community in crisis broke down and each family started to look out only for itself.

Memoirists have treated Jewish participation in the Shpere with much greater sympathy than contemporaneous accounts did. In her memoir Sarah Selver-Urbach also commented on the participation of the Jewish police:

I shall not dwell on the ghastly fact that this hideous operation [carrying out the Shpere Aktion] was entrusted to Jewish policemen, or on the way in which it was executed. The one remark that I wish to make: not all the 'Sonderkommando' were willing tools of the Germans. Far from it. Many of them risked their lives trying to save or help some child or person, and among those who participated in the gruesome operation, several went out of their minds afterwards, or came out with severe emotional scars that stayed with them all their lives.

357 Ibid., 314-319.

358 Zelkowicz focused on the role of the Jewish police in the Shpere in two short essays. One from the first day of the curfew on 5 September 1942 was simply titled “The Jewish Police.” See Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 305–306. He wrote a particularly scathing essay, entitled “Not Only the Jewish Police,” responding to the events of the following day when German authorities joined Jewish police in round ups on 6 September. Ibid., 311–314.

359 Selver-Urbach, Through the Window, 92.
Selver-Urbach only tacitly acknowledged the existence of Jewish betrayals during the 
Shpere. Instead, she actively chose to focus on the victimhood of Jewish police as they 
faced unimaginable decisions while carrying out German orders. 

In similar ways to Selver-Urbach, Sara Zyskind’s assessment of Jewish participation in the round up of older Jews benefited from the time lapse between the Shpere and the reconstruction of her experiences in the Łódź ghetto nearly forty years later. Zyskind recalled with compassion the awful situation of the Jewish police at the time:

The Jewish policemen conducting the search were in a terrible predicament. Failing to produce a child on his list might mean instant death for a man. But the very moment that he was ferreting a child out of its hiding place, another policeman was conducting a search for his own children! There are several policemen whose minds became unhinged in the course of their grisly task. Others, encountering the terrified eyes of their little victims hiding in some dark corner, pretended not to have seen a thing, reporting back that the children simply couldn’t be found. But this effort didn’t succeed, for it failed to produce the stipulated number of children.³⁶⁰

Writing decades after the Shpere allowed her to temper expectations about Jewish responses and come to a more sympathetic understanding of the effects of German policies on Jewish decision-making. 

Contemporaneous accounts of Jewish police and their involvement in Aktionen targeting vulnerable members of the ghetto populations were not completely devoid of sympathy for the predicament of Jewish police. Particularly instructive as a counter example is an account of an Aktion against the elderly inhabitants of the Vilna ghetto. On

26 July 1942, Herman Kruk observed a group of ghetto policemen as they delivered the elderly of the Vilna Ghetto to their Lithuanian murderers. Kruk described the scene in his diary: “The trucks begin to rumble, set out, and at the crossroads 25 Jewish policemen remain standing, ashamed and as if they have been slapped in the face. … The trucks rush to Ponar, and the Jewish Police, tearful and sweating, go on foot to report that the order has been carried out.”

With shame etched on their faces, the policemen sent the mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers of the community to their deaths. The knowledge that their execution of German orders ensured the erasure of the memories and traditions embodied in the elders of the community had to be devastating. In contrast to Zelkowicz, Kruk empathized with the police. Kruk recognized, as did the police he described, that Jewish participation in the murder of their own was an assault on the Jewish collective, a devastating form of self-injury.

At the heart of Jewish anger against their Jewish oppressors was the perceived injustice of the implementation of German orders. Ghetto residents with protekcja ensured their relatives’ exemption. But the German quota had to be filled. For every child or aged person that was successful in evading capture, another person had to be taken in his or her place.

Before the Germans intervened, Jewish police and medical examiners handed down the designation of “fit” or “unfit.” If chronological age was not an adequate marker, Jewish and German enforcers adopted the designations of looking “old” and “weak.”

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Dawid Sierakowiak’s mother was the victims of such circumstances. The teenager was enraged at the injustice of the situation. He blamed the Jewish doctors—“old, mean, and sour deportees from Prague”—that designated his mother for death because of her weak, emaciated state. He blamed his father, who did nothing to prevent the authorities from taking his wife, and was perhaps “glad to be rid of a wife with whom life had been becoming harder and harder.” Sierakowiak blamed all of the children and older people who had evaded death because of their connections. He blamed everyone but the Germans for the death of his beloved mother.\textsuperscript{362}

4.7 German Intervention

On 6 September German authorities led by Hans Biebow entered the ghetto to take over the \textit{Aktion} after determining Jewish efforts insufficient. Witnesses to the \textit{Shpere} noted the chaos introduced to an already panicky, grief-stricken environment in the ghetto when German officials took over. In his memoirs of the time, Yankl Nirenberg recalled the effects of German intervention:

The Jewish police were supposed to round up the children and elderly victims, but were unsuccessful. The Germans were brought in to carry out the “Aktion.” The Germans demanded that everyone line up outside of their residences in lines of four. Soon two Germans carrying revolvers, after shooting into the air a few times to frighten the crowd, began removing from the lines children as well as adults who looked unhealthy, disregarding their work cards. The victims were soon led away, loaded onto waiting trucks and driven to 77 Drewnowska, the assembly point.\textsuperscript{363}

\textsuperscript{362} Sierakowiak, \textit{Diary}, 218–221.

Most Jewish accounts portrayed a strict division between German and Jewish enforcement. Jewish police charged with carrying out the Aktion adhered most strictly to the ideological parameters said to dictate the fate of the Jews. Observing the differences between Jewish “nabbers” and the others—the Germans—Zelkowicz underscored this irony:

When Jewish police nab, there is some logic to it: anyone who cannot work, the parasites of the ghetto, anyone who consumes bread for no purpose, children up to age ten, the elderly at age sixty-five, and the incurably ill. When the others nab, they do so with neither rhyme nor reason: a distended leg—get in the cart. A slumping shoulder—to the “trash.” A red beard, without even one gray hair—taken away. Without order, without logic, at random, helter-skelter abduction.364

Zelkowicz found solace in Jewish consistency in implementing German orders. The very categories that comprised National Socialist ideology and condemned the Jews of Łódź to death were the ones that had provided order and some solace in a time of intense uncertainty and misery. Other accounts, such as Dawid Sierakowiak’s diary entries recounting the loss of his mother, suggested more uncertainty in Jewish reactions. The Jewish police and medical examiners that conducted selections were no less confused and inconsistent than the German forces that intervened a few days later.365 The bifurcated reactions to Jewish and German enforcers in diaries and memoirs reflected the witnesses’ emotional reactions to specific circumstances. In no account did Jewish witnesses equate Jewish participation with the undeniable brutality of German officials.

364 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 318.

365 Sierakowiak, Diary, 218–221.
Zelkowicz explained how German involvement in the *Aktion* created confusion and forced Jews to play a guessing game: “No one knows what to wear when he or she descends to the courtyard for inspections. [...] However, since everyone’s fate hinges on foolish or malevolent caprice, people are in distress and do not know how to behave. Neighbors advise each other in whispers.”

Ghetto residents expected Jewish police to honor exemptions granted by Rumkowski and signed by Biebow. In the first days of the *Aktion* as Jewish police visited dwellings to round up unfortunate victims, Jews in the ghetto held the reasonable expectation that the “right” birthdates could save them from death.

Germans who carried out selections beginning on 6 September established a wholly different protocol and shattered expectations that chronological age could thwart “the Nazi beast.” German authorities moved house by house and demanded that all residents line up in the courtyard of buildings. Germans forced mothers and fathers to give up their children. Parents who did not comply were shot on the spot. German designation of aged Jews for transport to collection points in the ghetto intensified Jewish anxiety.

Chronological parameters no longer applied. Germans paid little credence to papers offered as evidence that one was younger than imagined. Appearance operated as the governing factor in shaping German decisions. Anyone, no matter their age, that appeared “old” or “weak” could be thrown onto the carts hauling men, women, and

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367 Dawid Sierakowiak used this phrase to describe German authorities in the Łódź ghetto in his diary. Sierakowiak, *Diary*.
children to designated collection points. As a result, ghetto residents drew on all resources to make themselves look younger and healthier. Women who had aged prematurely in the ghetto sought to disguise features considered elderly:

They dye their prematurely gray hair. If they have no dye, they conceal their gray hair coquettishly under a silk scarf so that, Heaven forbid, it will not be seen and they will not be considered elderly... They smear their blue, starving, dried-out lips with red lipstick. When crimson is unavailable, a red pencil or a piece of red paper suffices. They paint their pale cheeks with rouge. Neighbors observe each other to look young and camouflage their premature aging. Husbands stand by and say sadly: “For whom and for what purpose are our chaste, loyal wives laboring, for whom are they dolling up?” One thing these women do not need to do is to underscore the blue color under their eyes. Plenty of blue markings rest under every Jewish eye - from hunger, from years of deprivation, from yearnings for persons near and dear, and from the grim terror that radiates from their eyes, a terror that neither makeup nor anything else could conceal.368

Women were not alone in their efforts to conceal the aging effects of the ghetto on their physical appearance. Men drew up collars to disguise graying beards and strategically “fluffed” their pockets to appear stronger.

Oskar Rosenfeld described German involvement in the Aktion. Rosenfeld witnessed German officials question the elderly Rabbi Emil Krakauer during an inspection. The elderly rabbi, who lived with Rosenfeld, was taken away with his wife. Rosenfeld recounted the scene:

Where do you work?—Where is your wife? Your daughter.—Pause. How old are you?—Pause. Wants to take me. Jewish commandant whispers something in his ear—saved. ‘The real old ones are going.’ Blind Rabbi

368 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 348-349.
Krakauer (Komotau) and wife. Conducting themselves heroically. Went without *siderl*. Fortunately they are carrying some food and many layers of clothing. Still hope that they will stay here. […] Alone in the apartment since the rabbi and wife were taken away. Maybe they’ll still come back? Would make me happy—a flash of light that would be able to reconcile me with much.369

4.8 Elderly Reactions during the *Shpere*

An official exemption was the best way for elderly Jews to avoid being “nabbed” by Jewish or German officials during the *Shpere*. Exemptions were awarded on the basis of *protekcja* and *pleyes*. In order to obtain a letter of exemption one had to know the right person. Elderly family members and children of policemen, firefighters, factory managers, and the “White Guard” were exempt from deportation during the *Shpere Aktion* in September 1942. Only the privileged few received exemptions, issued by the Jewish Administration and stamped by Biebow. The administration designated the collection points for those with exempt status on the morning of 6 September 1942 as an added layer of protection against the capricious nature of selections.370 Some followed the order but still did not trust the safety of these refuges.371

But the protection promised in these letters did not always suffice in the atmosphere of chaos that reigned during the *Shpere Aktion*. As Zelkowicz noted: “When panic strikes and malevolence is given free rein, however, even an ironclad letter such as

369 Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto*, 125. Emil Krakauer and his wife both appear in the Łódź Ghetto Names Registry. The entry for Emil Krakauer, born 29 April 1876, listed the date of his deportation as 12 November 1942. The deportation date for Mathilda Krakauer (née Hart), born 4 May 1872, was entered as 13 September 1942.


this provides no security, because one may not have an opportunity to explain, justify oneself and—pull out the letter from one's pocket for display." Just as being the right age fell short of the promise for survival, so did the potential of protekcja.

Success in obtaining exemption from round-ups in the past did not guarantee the same outcome for elderly Jews in September 1942. Nevertheless aging ghetto residents flooded the administration with requests for exemptions. Of the 5,000 Jews who arrived in the Łódź ghetto from Vienna in fall 1941, only one-third remained in the ghetto at the time of the Shpere. One of them, Rosa Steiner, procured a life-saving piece of paper that had saved her from deportation in May. In the final hours before being removed from her residence at the old age home at Gnieźnieńska 26, she sought to extend that protection. She called upon a young Polish poet whom she had befriended upon her arrival the previous October and who had helped her avoid the fate of her fellow Jews from Vienna during the May Aktion. Hoping to enlist some sympathy from a fellow writer and influence from an employee of the administration, Steiner also sent a note to the office where Oskar Rosenfeld worked in the Ghetto Administration. Rosenfeld noted receipt of the request in his diary on 4 September 1942: “A piece of paper from the old


373 See for example the cases of two elderly women, Stefanie Silberstein and Adele Weisskopf, in Chronik 1942, 645-656.

374 Hundreds of western Jews died in the ghetto during the winter months immediately following their arrival in the ghetto. During the Aktion of May 1942 that targeted western Jews 3,247 of the original 5,000 were sent to their deaths at Chełmno. See Baranowski, Wiener Juden im Getto Łódź, 1941-1944.

375 See “The Case of Rosa Steiner,” in Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 290–297. Michal Unger posits that the young poet who befriended Rosa Steiner was S.B. Szajewicz (1908-1945).
age home to the office: ‘Please save me, the house is surrounded. Rosa Steiner, writer, Vienna.’

For Steiner her efforts were too late. When Jewish police surrounded the home at Gnieźnieńska she scribbled a final note to her poet friend and had it delivered by courier as she was carted from the building. It read: “Our home was surrounded by Jewish police at dawn. No one can enter or leave. Help, my friend! Do what you can. I don’t want to die yet. Rosa Steiner.”

Not everyone acted. Discussions of survival strategies connote an active struggle against something. For older ghetto residents doing nothing could also act as a mechanism for coping with the physical, emotional, and mental strain of daily life. The increased fear and palpable anxiety that spread through the ghetto on 4 September 1942 had little effect on those older Jews who adopted a policy of proceeding through life as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening around them.

Zelkowicz identified the religious origins of such reactions in the story of old Krell. The elderly man “knew nothing.” He studied Torah, ate what his wife gave him (if she had anything to give), and kept to himself. Old Krell remained unaware of the Shpere even as the Jewish police entered his room to take him away. He met the authorities with a “bewildered” look of disbelief and asked: “Why should the police be interested in me?”

376 Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto*, 121.
377 Qtd. in Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days*, 297.
378 Ibid., 334.
A life of piety and of “fealty to God and Judaism” had protected old Krell by providing a comfortable barrier between his spiritual and corporeal existence. His religious devotion allowed him to transcend the effects of German policies and communal expectations. The barrier was only maintained because of his wife’s support. Old Krell’s wife made a decision not to inform the old man about the Shpere. “What purpose would that serve? Just to sadden him?” Instead she carried grief enough for both of them in the days leading up to the “nabbing” of old Krell. Only as the elderly couple was separated in their home did the wife explode in a fit of anguish.

Some older people remained wholly unaware of what was going on around them or chose to remain in denial. Zelkowicz presented the naïve older men who seemed to live in a bubble. Not even as police were carrying them away did they realize what was going on. They had been content to live life as they could—working, studying, providing for the family. Only their family members comprehended the implications.

While some, like old Krell, met their fate unexpectedly and unknowingly, others undeterred by declined requests for exemption, desperately sought places to hide during the Shpere. But hiding was not an easy task for older men and women. Zelkowicz noted the particular difficulties of aged Jews who attempted to hide:

The elderly and the ill lack even this escape option. Feebly and slowly they shuffle from the apartment to the loft, from the loft to the cellar, from the cellar to the storeroom…Wherever they go, however, they encounter people with terror in their eyes who warn them away with trembling lips. The field is too far away. They cannot run as children can. They cannot take the risk of so lengthy a

379 Ibid., 333.
trip. During the Shpere, only their eyes protrude from their sockets and the thought races through their minds:

“Got to hide…Where can one hide…?”

Finding a physical space big enough to contain a mature body and one that could be easily reached despite declining physiology was next to impossible in the ghetto. Families that wrestled with the idea often deterred older members from attempting to evade the round up.

The aged were hindered not only by their own physical disabilities but also by their neighbors’ fear. Herein lay the corrosive effects of Nazi policies that intensiﬁed during the Shpere. Bonds of magnanimity and common purpose that held the Jews of Łódź together and could have provided a source for solidarity had already eroded beyond repair. In most cases, neighbors feared much more for their own lives than for the lives of their elderly neighbors. The consequences of a German discovering an older man or woman in hiding in the building were deadly.

Yankl Nirenberg reported the retaliatory methods that German authorities employed upon discovering an elderly Jew who had been hiding. While conducting random raids to “check their work,” the Germans discovered an elderly man who had emerged from his hiding place after evading capture during the German’s ﬁrst visit. As a result, the Germans rounded up all of the people remaining at Lutomierska 42 and sent them to collection points to await transport to Chelmno.

381 Ibid., 354.

382 Hilton, “My Story,” RG-02, File 164, 76. Rita Hilton relayed the experience of a friend from the ghetto in her memoir. Hilton’s friend agonized over the last-minute decision to dissuade her elderly parents from trying to ﬁnd a hiding place. Instead, she ushered them down to the courtyard, where they were immediately ordered to board the cart on its way to one of the collection points.
Hiding was difficult for older men and women but not impossible. Some elderly were able to evade capture. Just as neighbors could deter the aged from attempting to hide, so could they aid the elderly in their attempts to survive. In her memoir, Rita Hilton recalled how the “landlady” of their building helped to save her grandparents when it was time for the residents of their building to present themselves for inspection. Hilton attributed the survival of her whole family to the landlady, whom she described as a “very shrewd, very plain and uneducated lady.”

German authorities used the family as an organizing principle to identify Jews able to work and separate those they intended to murder. Under these circumstances, some Jews in the ghettos created families to try to escape death. Fictitious families were invented to save people from deportation. In some cases, the aged of the community benefited from such novel family structures. The aged also looked beyond their actual family to form partnerships. In this regard it appears the Łódź ghetto was not unique. In the Vilna ghetto, Yitzhak Arad noted that the Yellow Passes Aktion in October 1941 resulted in the creation of “fictitious” families. Unmarried men and women added spouses and children to their permits to fill in vacancies. For example, Herman Kruk,

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383 Rita Hilton lived in the ghetto with her mother and grandparents, Majer and Szajndla Klajnert, in a building on the corner of Młynarska [Mühlgasse] and Berka Joselewicza [Brunnenstrasse]. Hilton recalled events from the Shpere Aktion that she claimed took place “before noon on Yom Kippur.” In 1942 Yom Kippur fell on 21 September, which was after the curfew had been lifted on 12 September. See Rita Hilton, “My Story,” USHMM, RG-02.164, Acc. 1994.A.0274, pp. 74-75.

384 For more on the creation of fictitious families see, Trunk, Lodz Ghetto, 300n3.

who was 44 at the time of the *Aktion*, successfully added 75-year-old Pati Kremer to his life-saving permit.

Dina Abramowicz witnessed the mismatched couple during the *Aktion*: “When the column of Judenrat employees began to move, we suddenly saw, to our amazement and fear, a strange couple: Herman Kruk walked in his short coat and beret, with firm strides and lifted head and on his arm the ancient Pati Kremer, who with her grey hairs and wrinkled face, looked like a grandmother.”\(^386\) The creation of a “fictitious” family rescued Pati Kremer from death. This was not the last time that Herman Kruk would come to the aid of Mrs. Kremer. The partnership between the two loyal Bundists remained an influential relationship for both of them.

### 4.9 Locations of Aging and Destruction

Concepts of space are critical to understanding the collective trauma experienced by the ghetto community. Displays of grief, mourning, and anguish were public even when they occurred within one’s dwelling. Overcrowding in the ghetto ensured that no one had privacy. In public scenes families were ripped apart.\(^387\) Nirenberg recalled how his mother was torn right out of his arms.\(^388\) The language employed in such accounts, used often in contemporaneous and postwar accounts, conveyed a physical pain analogous to the emotional trauma left in the wake of violent separations between people

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\(^386\) Dina Abramowicz was quoted in Benjamin Harshav’s introduction to the English translation of Herman Kruk’s diary. See Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944*, eds. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xli.

\(^387\) Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days*.

who had spent decades together. Dawid Sierakowiak expressed a similar totality of anguish: “Nothing will fill up the eternal emptiness in the soul, brain, mind, and heart that is created by the loss of one’s most beloved person.”

In obvious ways, personal space shrunk. Zelkowicz described the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped within in the walls of one’s apartment. He also emphasized the inability of people to escape their neighbors’ grief. Shrieks and cries infiltrated personal space from the surrounding apartments. Yet some people were able to wall themselves off from what is happening—note, for instance, the willing naiveté of old Krell. And yet in another way, the space between people expanded. In Zelkowicz’s words: “And how distances within the ghetto have grown! Stories about events in a neighboring house reach you as if from a great distance, from over the seas… The curfew has prised buildings apart and created intercontinental intervals between streets.”

Confined by the curfew, residents felt more isolated. Oskar Rosenfeld described the curfew as a “ghetto in the ghetto.” He was even more cut off from the world than he had been previously: “no mail, no newspaper, no radio, no telephone, no gramophone. Ghetto created from five o’clock on September 5 curfew. Absolute: ghetto in the ghetto.” Detained in their dwellings for a week, remnants were forced constantly to confront the chasms left by the loss of family members and friends. Rosenfeld was overcome by the loss of his friends the elderly Krakauer couple, who had lived with him since they had come to the ghetto in fall 1941. In a new entry on 10 September, he was

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389 Sierakowiak, Diary, 226.
390 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 354.
391 Rosenfeld, In the Beginning Was the Ghetto, 123.
thinking of them again: “Another night of lying alone for a long time, unable to sleep. Fate of the Krakauers hard to bear. Dreaming in waking state of this couple. Thinking of sderl and tallith—tefillin bag.”

Rosenfeld’s distress about the fate of the rabbi and his wife was logged intermittently over the next few days. In direct and truncated prose, he described the feeling of unreality that marked the days of the Shpere. Peppered throughout his stream-of-consciousness account were hints of longing for his old friend. On 11 September: “Fear and dread, because of Erev Shabbat and Erev Rosh Hashanah. Been reading a lot in Tanach, especially Devarim (laws, blessings, and curses). Unfortunately, lost Rabbi Krakauer… Could the danger have been avoided?” Alone in his dwelling, Rosenfeld questioned what more he could have done.

After selections were made in the street and German authorities moved to the next street, the Jews left behind returned to their dwellings in observance of the curfew. They came back with fewer people than had left. In the claustrophobic environment created by the curfew, the remaining Jews recognized the senescent effects of the Shpere. In Zelkowicz’s words:

[W]hen you sit in the room and wallow in your sorrow—your own and that of your wife and son—commiserating with your neighbors and all the Jews…when you have been sitting so long in that room, the mirror that you glanced at reflects an emaciated, fragile and crumbling figure. You, too, are a candidate for “throwing on the garbage heap…!”” When you sit in the room and sneak a contemplative glance at your wife, who has aged many years in the past two days, and your handsome son, and you observe his joyless,

392 Ibid., 127.
393 Ibid.
harried features and the deathly terror emanating from his deep, dark eyes, the general fear leads you to dread for your lives: yours, your wife’s and your trembling son’s/ All of you are candidates, all of you have dim, withered, gray-green facial features. Those are the kinds of people they are seeking, the kind who are nabbed. 394

Even the rare family left untouched by the Shpere in the first days succumbed to the effects of forced collective aging.

People rounded up during the Shpere were collected in designated buildings before being shipped out of the ghetto to the death camp at Chelmno. Former hospitals at Łagiewnicka and Drewnowska streets and the old age homes at Gnieźnieńska 26 and Dworska 74 served as collection points. Additional collection points were set up in Marysin and the central prison on Czarniecki Street. 395 Yankl Nirenberg recalled the collection points as indescribable, surreal:

The conditions at the assembly points are impossible to describe. People were continuously arriving by truck. They were squeezed into rooms, with many sick people among them, where they trampled on top of one another. This sight is impossible to conceive even in the most terrifying images of hell.

A few hours later came the trucks that had earlier emptied the hospitals. They loaded up the victims in layers, one on top of the other, the way logs are piled. Living people were placed beside the dead, children with the elderly. They became a lumpy mass of human flesh. Most suffocated before reaching the gas chambers of Chelmno. 396

394 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 369.

395 Zelkowicz referred to these locations. See Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 367.

396 Nirenberg, 60-61.
Of particular interest in Nirenberg’s description of the “indescribable” was the parallel structure of the third from the last sentence: “Living people were placed beside the dead, children with the elderly.” All Jews in these collectives were designated for murder. Nirenberg drew a sharp connection between the elderly and death, in contrast to children and life.

Zelkowicz commented on the appropriateness of the locations chosen as collection points:

If these “shelters” are typical (“typical” is a consequence of logic that must always be related to some trend of thought, correct or incorrect, dictated by an idea that is, or looks, correct. In any event, it cannot be arbitrary, random and chaotic), they are nevertheless symbolic: every abducted person is ill, shattered, and indisputably worthy of admission to a hospital. These hospitals, however, have neither beds nor doctors who would wish to cure the patients... Each of the nabbed persons is fit for admission to an old-age home, even if he has not reached senescence, even if he is a boy under the age of ten. No nabbed person, upon mounting the cart, is not prematurely aged, broken and gray-haired... However, the inhabitants of an old-age home count on staying there for months and weeks, if not years, whereas nabbed persons reckon their stay in days, a few hours, or minutes...

In her memoir Sarah Selver-Urbach recounted two rather different outcomes for elderly during the Shpere. One of them concerned an aunt:

Later, when the 'Sperre' was finally over, grandmother and my two aunts, Huma and Doba, told us what had happened to aunt Ita: she was with them, in my grandmother's house, when the Germans burst in, and she went out to them of her own will, climbed into the crowded cart, waved her hand and cried: “I'm going after the children!”

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397 Zelkowicz, In Those Terrible Days, 367.
The other involved Selver-Urbach’s grandmother:

Grandmother was saved by a miracle. My aunts hid her under innumerable rags in the big wardrobe, but left the wardrobe doors open. This clever stratagem tricked the Germans who saw no point in searching an open closet. But grandmother emerged from this hideout unhinged: she’d become a child again, totally dependent on her two daughters. The two looked after her and cared for her every need. They were liquidated when the Ghetto was liquidated, but I do not know how, exactly each of them met her death.398

In both cases the women’s experiences, or at least Selver-Urbach’s narrative of them, collapsed the categories of childhood and old age in death.

A lucky few with personal connections, who could wield influence and secure exemptions or “liberation” from collections points,399 were able to survive the *Shpere Aktion*. Returning from a collection point was rare and notable. Oscar Rosenfeld observed in his diary: “Report: none of the old people were let go, only the eighty-four-year-old Mrs. Poznanska (Marysin!)”400 On the rare occasion that elderly were “liberated,” they returned to their places of residence shaken by the experience. On 9 September, Rosenfeld described the return of older people who had successfully evaded deportation by hiding:

Inhabitants from the yard congratulate each other, as they emerge again here and there, on having been saved. Older gray-haired women appear: “God be praised … Mrs. X …” Tears in their eyes. Old people who been in hiding

398 Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window*, 97.

399 In his account of the first days of the Aktion, Zelkowicz described the ways in which people were “liberated” from collection points. See Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days*, 368-373.

400 Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto*, 123.
suddenly return to the houses, weak, nothing to eat for
days, supported by relatives so they wouldn’t collapse.  

4.10 Responses to the Loss of Elderly

The traumatic effects of the Shpere—the murder of two generations in the
ghetto—continued for months after the round-up ceased and the curfew was lifted.
Zelkowicz described the ghetto as completely transformed after the Shpere: “You know
them well, your neighbors. The living conditions in the ghetto made sure of that. Today
[6 September 1942], however, you hardly know them at all. They have changed
overnight—not only in their outer appearance, but in their state of mind and inner essence
[…] All your neighbors, all your acquaintances have been transformed inside and out, 
overnight.”

Zelkowicz described the words of wisdom and reassurance spouted by an elderly
preacher whom he witnessed in the potato queue before the curfew was instated. He
equated the old man with a “leaf [that is …] firmly affixed to its branch and does not
wish to surrender and fall.” According to Zelkowicz, this is what the old man said to the
crowd:

Listen, people. I’m already nothing but a relic. Not even
one tooth remains in my mouth. Just the same, I want to
eat my potatoes. I don’t know, but my heart tells me to do
so and I’m confident! No one will success in wiping out
the Jews! They have remained Jewish, and so they will
remain! Individuals who are stricken will meet a very

401 Ibid.

bitter fate, for sure, but the *klal*, the collective? The collective will survive! Listen to what I’m telling you!403

Zelkowicz observed the half-hearted response of the crowd who had been listening to the man and wondered if he deserved more: “He [the old man] should have been hoisted in people’s arms and kissed on his every limb. But who will hoist the old Jewish giant, who will kiss him, when people can hardly marshal the strength to sigh or groan…?”404 The elderly man—likely to “meet a very bitter fate” in the coming days—was confident, inspired, triumphant. The people who surrounded him, the ones that would be forced to live on without his generation, were doubtful.

In November 1942, just weeks after conclusion of the *Shpere Aktion*, the *Chronicle* reported on some of the tragic aftereffects. One of the “most senior officers” in the ghetto, 35-year-old Saloman Malkes, committed suicide. According to the *Chronicle* report, Malkes had been suffering from “severe depression” since the deportation of his mother. Genia-Basia Malkes was 62 years old when she was sent to her death at Chelmno on 10 September 1942. The *Chronicle* commented that the suicide [*Freitod*] of Malkes made a “deep impression” [*tiefen Eindruck*] on the ghetto.405

Upon the death of Wilhelm Caspari in January 1944, Oskar Rosenfeld wrote an obituary for him in the *Chronicle*. It included a biographical sketch of the man, an overview of his important contributions to cancer research and his scientific research in the ghetto, and the following passage about his decline:

403 Ibid., 310.

404 Ibid., 311.

In recent months one could see signs of mental and physical exhaustion in Professor Caspari. The uncertainty as to the fate of his wife, combined with the shortage of food, which has been a problem since the ghetto administration canceled the Talon, hit the almost 72-year-old man hard. His weakened body was not strong enough to fight an attack of flu—it was the time of the flu epidemic. After a short illness Caspari died on Friday, the 21st of January, in the hospital, where he succumbed to pneumonia.  

Songs provided some people with a way to express their loss. The poetry set to music revealed that the Jews left behind felt older. A woman called Miriam wrote the following lyrics at the age of eighteen during the winter following the Shpere:

I walk around like an old man,
My eyes are wet and red,
The sky is dark and cold,
And tomorrow death will come.

Sarah Selver-Urbach remembered the sense of absolute loss:

Since the end of the 'Sperre', our situation went on deteriorating in every respect. [...] We no longer had the strength to suffer. Our distress drove us to the state of the patient who prays for the end to come, no matter how, as long as it will put an end to his torments. But when would these torments stop? When?

It seemed to us that we would not be able to go on, that some change must occur in our ordeal and oppression. But no change occurred to alleviate our plight. We went on moaning and groaning under our heavy yoke, and the future that stretched before us looked black and infinite."


408 Selver-Urbach, Through the Window, 100.
Families were destroyed in the process of the Shpere. Zelkowicz was overwhelmed by the anguish displayed by family members as their loved ones were carried out of the family dwelling. Some of them had lived there for more than half a century. In his memoir Nirenberg noted the effect on families: “The Sperre left its mark on the survivors. This was not the first catastrophe, but the worst so far. Entire families had been killed and the majority of survivors had lost at least one relative in the tragic Sperre days.”

Isaiah Trunk described the devastating effects of the Shpere Aktion on the Committee of Rabbis in the Łódź ghetto. Because the majority of the Rabbis were elderly, they were sent to Chełmno during the Aktion, which devastated official religious leadership in the ghetto. According to Trunk, “Rumkowski then abolished the ‘Committee of Rabbis’ and personally took over the function of performing marriage rites.” Michal Unger noted the decline in religious activity after transports for killing began in 1942. The decline of organized religious activity in the ghetto after the Shpere was a direct consequence of the loss of the older generation.

According to Nirenberg Rumkowski’s power was diminished after the Shpere. Biebow (on behalf of the German Ghettoverwaltung) addressed the ghetto inmates directly for the first time. A notice was posted demanding that everyone show up for

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410 Nirenberg, Memoirs of the Łódź Ghetto, 64.

411 For more on this see Isaiah Trunk, Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 193n31.

work to make up for time lost during the Shpere and announcing that the Sonderabteilung (special unit) would take over supervision and distribution of food supplies (it had previously been in charge of searches and confiscation of valuables). In Nirenberg’s words:

After the Sperre days the Sonderabteilung became the most important institution in the ghetto. It was entrusted with overseeing food supplies and setting the general rations and special rations for the workers in the factories. Within the Sonderabteilung were Kontrolreferat groups. A special police force was created (called the Sonderpolizei) with commissars and officers who received special rations. The special police was under the command of Gertler and his representative Marek Kliger. Rumkowski and his commandant Rosenblatt had no power over them.413

The days immediately following the curfew were characterized by continued fear, shock, renewal, and speculation. Rumors circulated about impending transports and killings. Most documented rumors concerned the fate of the children; few discussed the elderly. Rosenfeld’s diary entry from 19 September was revealing: “Children presumed to be in the town of Wielun (near Kalisz), under supervisions of Jewish women. Other version has it that they are in Poznan for blood transfusions. Similar assumptions already made during winter evacuation. Nothing is heard about the older people. Sudden cold spell.”414

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413 Nirenberg, Memoirs of the Łódź Ghetto, 65

414 Rosenfeld, In the Beginning Was the Ghetto, 131.
4.11 Conclusions

If there was any question before the Shpere Aktion about the intentions of the German occupation, the events of early September 1942 provided an incontrovertible answer. They also destroyed any remaining belief in the viability of Rumkowski’s “salvation through work strategy.” Contemporary observers recognized that all Jews—not just the elderly, the children, and incurably ill—were marked for a terrible fate. No amount of production could save them. In response to the proclamation of Announcement No. 391 on 5 September 1942 that issued a general curfew in the ghetto until “such time as it is nullified,” Zelkowicz speculated about possible reactions:

Who needs them here, those hundred thousand Jews who sit there polluting the air and needing to be fed? Whether they’re good or bad, who needs them? A few people may have an interest in the ghetto’s existence, but generally speaking, who needs the Jews? Who needs the ghetto…?

If thus far, people wished to blind themselves with the lame excuse, “The Jews are needed. The Jews are useful. The Jews work and earn their paltry rations,” it is now clear that the other side can get by, somehow, without the Jews’ usefulness and labor. There will be a curfew. All workplaces will be shut indefinitely, “To such a time as [the curfew] is nullified.”

If one sees in the line-up that a young or old man with or without a labor permit is chosen indiscriminately, doesn’t it prove explicitly that they’ve put the Jewish workers, the Jewish labor, to ridicule? Doesn’t it prove that they are not needed and can go to hell? Today, when Jewish labor is unneeded, what right had the entire ghetto to exist? Why should Łódź be the only exception in the Warthegau? Why feed a population of a hundred thousand Jews who are neither needed nor useful? The shpere order evokes numerous thoughts and reflections. None of them is
encouraging. No positive idea comes to mind. No one has the strength to enunciate it.415

The insights of Josef Zelkowicz seem to contradict postwar historical analysis. Israel Gutman claimed that, “Paradoxically, the September 1942 deportation, which proved that the deportees were being taken to their deaths, did not make the Jews of Łódź more aware and cognizant of the ‘Final Solution’.” In Gutman’s interpretation, the _Shpere Aktion_ had, if anything, the opposite effect: “The very selection of persons who could not or did not work led them to conclude that the Nazis—while not averse to killing Jews who brought them no benefit—could protect their workers, who therefore had a chance to survive.” From September 1942 until June 1944, Gutman maintained, “relative calm prevailed in the Lodz Ghetto.”416

That “calm,” as Zelkowicz had recognized, was neither routine nor peaceful. Rather it was agonizing grief that characterized the remnant of the ghetto in the wake of the _Shpere_. Without its elderly and its children, after September 1942 the Łódź ghetto was no longer a living community but an atomized group on the verge of death.

415 Zelkowicz, _In Those Terrible Days_, 324-325.

416 See Gutman, introduction to Trunk, _Łódź Ghetto_, liii.
CONCLUSION

On January 18, 1943 the Germans surrounded the Grodno ghetto in order to round up the Jews for deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Frejdowicz family and friends hid in an attic. Three babies were not hidden for fear that their crying would expose the others. Grandfather Nahum Frejdowicz chose to stay with the babies—two of them his grandchildren—and together they were taken to their deaths. Dr. Felix Zandman is the only grandson of Nahum Frejdowicz who survived the Holocaust.417

This description of an elderly man and three infants awaiting their killers in the Grodno ghetto in 1943 is inscribed just outside the building that holds the archival collections at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The inscription highlights a number of important themes that converge in my study of the experiences of elderly Jews in the Łódź ghetto. First, it reveals the totality of Nazi destruction. Germans killed the least threatening members of Jewish communities first. The murder of Jewish children remains a hallmark of the Nazi genocide representing the innocence and vulnerability of the victims and the brutality of the perpetrators.

This dissertation suggests that the murder of elderly Jews, in comparable ways, embodies the totality of the Shoah. The Nazi architects of the “Final Solution” marked all Jews for death and considered children of special concern as representatives of the Jewish

417 Inscription carved on the outside wall of the archive at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Many thanks to Doris Bergen for noting the inscription and bringing its relevance to my attention.
future. But Germans devoted considerable resources to kill the aged, despite their natural proximity to death, a sector of the population that posed little threat, present or future.

The incident from Grodno also points to the fragmentary nature of Jewish sources. Nahum Frejdowicz did not live to tell his experience. In order to reconstruct the lives of older Jews during the Holocaust scholars must supplement limited contemporary sources with postwar recollections and testimonies. Tendencies to memorialize and lionize victims of the Holocaust are intensified in after-the-fact contemplations about older men and women. For readers equipped with knowledge of the brutal death that followed round-ups in ghettos across German-occupied Eastern Europe, discovering moments of human dignity and solidarity lends comfort to a bleak period of history. For survivors, portraying elderly parents and grandparents as heroes is a way to imbue the lives of the victims with meaning and make sense of their own experiences. Yet postwar pieties and the desire for lessons and inspiration obscure the intricacies of human relationships in the ghetto.

The inscription at Yad Vashem indicates that Nahum Frejdowicz “chose” to remain with the youngest members of his family. The simplicity of this statement belies the complexities of such a decision. Perhaps the old man found purpose in his self-sacrifice. His ability to provide comfort to the younger members of the group could have acted as a means to reclaim his own agency. Likewise by choosing certain death, he was bolstering chances for his loved ones to survive. In choosing death, he left a legacy of Jewish life in his younger family members.

Viewed another way, it is possible that the decision was not Nahum Frejdowicz’s at all. As the evidence presented in this dissertation demonstrates, the corrosive
atmosphere of life in the ghettos ensured the atomization of the family. In this process of
dissolution elderly members were excluded first. Evidence of the devastation of family
relationships is generally only found in sources created at the time.

This dissertation has explored survival strategies and coping mechanisms of older
Jews in the Łódź ghetto. The strategies employed by a sector of the population deemed
already dead by their persecutors, memorialized by survivors, and neglected by scholars,
expose escalating tensions between individual and collective objectives. At the same
time, the efforts of elderly men and women in their fight to live highlight moments of
cohesion and disintegration in the social networks of which they were part. Each of the
first three chapters investigated one of the major contexts in which older Jews struggled
for survival: work, the family, and the wider community.

Very few elderly men and women found a tenable path for survival within the
official framework of “salvation through work.” Yet aged Jews in the Łódź ghetto
rejected the assumption that they fell into a category of “useless” individuals as defined
by German authorities and institutionalized by Rumkowski’s administration. Work of all
kinds provided a mode for older men and women to maintain continuities with the prewar
past and navigate new challenges in the ghetto. Ultimately, however, advanced age and
deteriorating conditions in the Łódź ghetto meant older men and women were
increasingly unable to provide for themselves. Work was a source of protection but it also
meant senescence for older Jews and for the community as a whole.

German policies of destruction resulted in the deaths of the vast majority of older
Jews in Łódź and instigated a process of rapid collective aging in the ghetto. Processes of
communal senescence found expression in the physical aging of ghetto residents—there
are many accounts of people whose hair turned white overnight—and atomization of fundamental social institutions, in particular the Jewish family.

The survival strategies of older men and women suggest that although hunger, fatigue, and death converged to form a brutal assault on the Jewish family, German subjugation and humiliation did not completely erode the family unit in the ghetto. Out of necessity, families shrank into smaller and smaller units of mutual obligation. For elderly Jews partnerships offered human connections necessary to thwart the process of total isolation and abasement.

Survival in tandem was not unique to the ghetto. Contemporary and postwar accounts discuss the importance of partnerships in concentration camps as well. In her diary from Bergen-Belsen, Hanna Lévy-Hass, a Yugoslavian Jewish Communist, alluded to the deadly implications of being alone in the camp. She described a young boy whose chest was black with fleas and their nests:

> Everyone avoids him. [...] The other night, he dragged his useless body from one bed to the other until the morning, begging people to make room for him. Everyone pushed him away in disgust. Besides, there are already two people in each bed. No one wants to be his “partner” and there are no empty beds. So young M. is dying with nowhere to rest his body. Painful story. His case is not unique. There are thousands of similar cases in the camp. Especially among the elderly. Their fate is dreadful. A bleak, odious, undignified end awaits them all; this slow, painful process of death by the decay and rot of their own bodies.418

By February 1945, when Lévy-Hass made these observations, in Bergen-Belsen young and old alike were close to death. Inmates sought comfort in human connection,

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and close quarters dictated that they share beds. In this case, as in the Łódź ghetto, overcrowding was not necessarily an impediment to survival. Rather having a partner and sharing a sleeping space was necessary to survival. For Lévy-Hass, a young woman at the time, the elderly seemed to embody the physical isolation and undesirability that spelled impending death.

Processes of atomization similar to those at the individual and family levels occurred in the community as whole. Aging Jews who could no longer rely on family sought solace in the care of the community. One of the most oft-cited reasons for seeking residence in one of the old age homes in the Łódź ghetto was loneliness. Loneliness meant death, and being with others meant a chance at life.

Strategies for survival utilized by older men and women were informed by their advanced age, their familial situations, and the opportunities afforded to them by the community. The ghetto experience intensified the conflicting impulses characteristic of the aging process. The process of aging required older Jews to confront their own physical and mental limitations, accelerated by external pressures. Aging men and women in the ghetto wrestled with the loss of autonomy associated with the decline of life. As a result they sought help in familiar communal institutions.

In the first two years of the ghetto period communal institutions supported older men and women in need. Beginning in 1942, however, German authorities co-opted Jewish organizations in the ghetto to implement policies intend to destroy the community. The atomization of the community as a result of German persecution paralleled the individual process of aging. The hallmark of a viable community is its ability to care for its most vulnerable members. And what is a community without the
living connection to the common heritage that binds individuals together and that infuses the collective with a continuity of purpose?

The *Shpere Aktion* resulted in the murder of most elderly Jews living in the Łódź ghetto. As a consequence, the remnant community underwent a process of forced collective aging. Yet even during the horrific days of September 1942, when ghetto residents recognized the fate of the young and old targeted during the *Shpere Aktion* and grief and panic spilled into the streets of the Łódź ghetto, older Jews resisted death.

Hanna Lévy-Hass’s diary testified that the relentless will to live persisted among the elderly in the camps, too. She described the elderly in the barracks with her:

These sick old women lie down, slowly dying; they rot alive. I don’t know how else to say it. And yet, they show such a will to live, it’s unbelievable. They never stop lamenting and asking for help. Sometimes, they really get on my nerves. For the most part they are women who come from well-to-do bourgeois milieus from Western Europe (Holland, Belgium, France), and in the past they were accustomed to living in comfort, surrounded by attention. They are totally incapable of understanding their current situation, completely unaware of the current reality … which makes them impossible sometimes. Yet they seem so wretched!

I thread my way between the narrow beds, crumpling their lace, an entire ocean of useless and smelly lace, relics of their former luxury. And I do my best to straighten up the places where they lie, to help them wash their faces. These living corpses, these jaundiced faces of ghosts struggling in spasms of agony – it is all truly horrible […] The first night, three of the patients died. I had to lay out their corpses and cover them […]. These nights spent in this hellish barracks have set my nerves on edge. I felt suddenly as though I had aged ten years. The shock was so violent that it took me several days to recover from it.419

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419 Ibid., 106–107.
Just as Jews left in the ghetto in the wake of the *Shpere* aged overnight, Lévy-Hass recorded a similar process of premature aging in response to her confrontation with the elderly women prisoners in Bergen-Belsen. In her description, physical revulsion at the smell, sight, and sound of the elderly—“these living corpses”—mingled with the “shock” of recognition that she too had aged, and perhaps she was not so different from them.

This dissertation has identified connections between the fate of the aged in the ghetto and the community as a whole. The concept of "senescence" has been used as a way to describe age as a trajectory toward death. In biogerontology “senescence” refers to the aging process of individual cells and whole organisms and how those processes relate to one another, analogous to the interplay between individuals and the collective presented in the dissertation. Another way to capture this interconnection is to invoke the concept of social death, introduced by Orlando Patterson in his studies of slavery, and applied to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany by Marion Kaplan. Discussing the effects of social exclusion on elderly German Jews, Kaplan wrote that, “social death can lead to physical death.” The argument advanced here—that physical death of the aged led to social death of the Łódź ghetto community—is both an extension and a reversal of that claim.

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