



Warsaw and Lodz: A Tale of Two Cities

One of the 19th century's most famous poets, Lord Byron, compressed into two lines of immortal verse an essential truth about how self-respecting men and women need to live: "Know yet not? / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow." José Rizal, hero of Filipino independence, made the same point still more graphically: "There are no tyrants where there are no slaves." Similar sentiments can be found in the literature of other lands. A Romanian proverb runs: "Whether one dies young or old, death is always the same. But it is not at all the same whether one dies like a lion or dies like a dog."



It is nowhere easy to predict who will seek a lion's fate or a dog's fate. Sometimes two groups of the same people, undergoing the same oppression from the same source, will respond to the threat in utterly different ways. For proof of this, we need look no further than the history of Poland — martyrdom in World War II — and, above all, two Polish cities: Warsaw and Lodz.

Among the best-known examples of Polish heroism is the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which television producer Y. Eric Bell [discussed at length](#) in *The New American's* January 14, 2002 issue. There, the Polish Jews displayed an awesome mixture of anguish, pride, and absolute determination that if they had to die at the Hitler State's hands, they would sell their lives as dearly as possible.

One Jewish eyewitness, Yitzhak Katznelson, reported the amazed shouts of a German soldier who had assumed his targets would be easily picked off. The soldier, Katznelson remembered, "ran down the stairs of the house which he had entered for the deliberate purpose of killing us. 'The Jews are shooting!' he cried out in utter bewilderment. Something unheard of! Jews firing! 'They have guns!'" The Nazi high command had assumed that the uprising would be crushed by January 1943. But, as Mr. Bell recounts, it was May before SS General Jürgen Stroop could report to his bosses that "*Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!*" ("There is no longer a Jewish district in Warsaw!"). Most of the surviving Warsaw Jews ended up in death camps.

Lodz — Poland's second-largest city, approximately 85 miles to Warsaw's southwest — underwent a different, less celebrated, and even more horrific doom. Two months after the Second World War began, Lodz became officially part of the Third Reich; but the victors accorded it nominal independence, rather than openly incorporating it into the General Government under direct Hitlerite rule. Renamed Litzmannstadt (to commemorate Imperial German general Karl von Litzmann, who had died three years earlier), Lodz had 672,000 inhabitants. Among these, more than a third were Jewish.

Instead of unleashing full persecution from the outset, the conquerors decided to set up — on economic grounds, in part — an officially approved ghetto, as they later did elsewhere in Poland. They placed in charge of this ghetto a Nazi official named Hans Biebow. Answering immediately to Biebow was a *Judenrat*, or "Jewish Council", which in practice served as the personal fiefdom of businessman and



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orphanage administrator Mordechai Chaim (“King Chaim”) Rumkowski. As more and more Jews were rounded up and herded into Lodz — frequently having been transported from areas as far distant as Luxembourg — so Rumkowski’s powers and responsibilities grew.

A sweatshop tyrant to whom the concept of shame meant nothing, Rumkowski kept the ghetto operational by conscripting his fellow Jews into a vast factory system, consisting of no fewer than 117 workshops. In return for being — when lucky — fed and housed, the employees had to suffer the ravages of disease (dysentery and typhus in particular), with wholly inadequate medical treatment, and with 12-hour working days. Rumkowski had no visible qualms about handing over personal antagonists on the *Judenrat* to the Nazi authorities. The Jewish, Hamburg-born Lucille Eichengreen — who by her 21st birthday had survived not only Lodz but also Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz — revealed in her 1994 memoirs *From Ashes to Life* Rumkowski’s sexual vices. One man who often saw Rumkowski close-up told Lucille bluntly: “He’s a pig, a child molester, and a lecher!” Of Lucille’s own encounters with “King Chaim,” she wrote:

He was well dressed, well fed, and seemingly without a care in the world. Most of us feared and detested him, although sometimes we thought of him with envy. He seemed to suffer none of the deprivations we did. He didn’t know the pain of hunger and cold. Even his horse and driver were well fed. He was responsible to the Germans for the entire ghetto, and it often seemed to us that he was more on their side than ours. All orders issued by the Germans appeared in ghetto posters over his name....

Eminent political philosopher and German-Jewish refugee Hannah Arendt, in her classic *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, noted Rumkowski’s appellation “Chaim the First.” She also mentioned him having “issued currency notes bearing his signature and postage stamps engraved with his portrait.” And Israel Gutman, specialist in Poland’s modern Jewish history, spoke in still more scathing terms:

The cult that he [Rumkowski] fostered leaves a repugnant, sickening impression ... he exuded the arrogance of yesterday’s slave newly empowered.... He would walk around the ghetto, visiting workplaces and apportioning extra rations to those he favored, appointing himself supreme judge, officiating at young couples’ weddings, and so on. The strange thing was that Rumkowski took his position and importance with the utmost seriousness and gravely acknowledged the pomp, praise and poems that were written in his honor in the ghetto calendars and official newspaper....

According to Rumkowski’s egomaniacal view of the world, a “good Jew” was one who did Rumkowski’s own bidding; a “bad Jew” was one who resisted it. When Lodz’s carpenters and gravediggers complained of their intolerable conditions and went on strike, Rumkowski called in the police and withheld the protesters’ food supplies. In August 1941 he closed the public kitchens that had, however inadequately, attempted to fill the ghetto’s empty bellies.

Those basking in his goodwill profited, thereafter, from food coupons; the others had to operate on the basis of “devil take the hindmost”. Isaiah Trunk, author of the 1962 treatise called simply *Lodz Ghetto*, described in understated language one result:

Another instance of murder due to hunger occurred in April 1943. A young man from a Hassidic Lodz family strangled ... a thirteen-year-old girl while no one was in the apartment and made off with four food coupons that belonged to the four sisters who occupied the apartment (the parents were no longer living). The murderer received the death penalty. A Jewish hangman and his Jewish assistants executed the sentence in the ghetto.



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Long before this — indeed long before the January 1942 Wannsee Conference, which had planned the Final Solution — the Nazis had set up the Chelmno killing center. Not all their formidably diligent censorship could prevent rumors spreading to Lodz itself about what happened to those Jews, Gypsies, and other so-called “subhumans” sent there. (At Chelmno the fatal gas was administered in vans rather than, as subsequently at Auschwitz and other camps, in buildings.) Even these rumors did not impede Rumkowski’s lethal selfishness. On the contrary, they swelled it.

In September 1942 “King Chaim” told the ghetto that the SS would arrest 20,000 Jews: above all women, children, the old, and the sick. His announcement deserves quoting, given that in any short list of the 20th century’s most nauseating executive speeches, it would have to be included (alongside FDR’s Boston rhetoric from October 1940: “While I am talking to you mothers and fathers, I give you one more assurance ... your boys are not going to be sent to any foreign wars”). The 65-year-old Rumkowski proclaimed:

A grievous blow has struck the ghetto. They are asking us to give up the best we possess — the children and the elderly. I was unworthy of having a child of my own, so I gave the best years of my life to children. I’ve lived and breathed with children, I never imagined I would be forced to deliver this sacrifice to the altar with my own hands. In my old age, I must stretch out my hands and beg: Brothers and sisters! Hand them over to me! Fathers and mothers: Give me your children!

Notwithstanding his cleverness and fundamental contempt for his subjects, Rumkowski proved in at least one respect to be singularly simpleminded. His whole dictatorship had been predicated on the assumption that the Nazis would always want him. He never perceived the basic truth that to an SS goon-squad, Jews were simply Jews, no matter how great their protestations of loyalty to the Reich. By August 1944 even his prodigious luck had run out. On the 28th of that month, he perished at Auschwitz: not, it would seem, at the hands of the Nazis, but at the hands of those fellow Jewish captives whom he had betrayed. Unable to escape death themselves, they determined to revenge themselves upon the architect of their sufferings, in the wartime attitude epitomized by the words “You can always take one with you.”

Once the Soviets “liberated” Lodz in January 1945, they found a grand total of 577 Jews who remained — after a fashion — alive. To cite Isaiah Trunk afresh:

In no other ghetto did the Nazi *Führerprinzip* or authoritarian principle adapted to the ghetto conditions take on such proportions as at Lodz. Nowhere else was the Jewish council, as a collective representative body of the ghetto population, so degraded to such a miserable role of servile figureheads as in the Lodz Ghetto.

Warsaw and Lodz: both in the same land; both subjected to state terror on an almost unimaginable scale; yet how different the people’s responses! In the former city, defiance. In the latter city, defiance forever marginalized; instead, predominant submission to the credo “We’re from the government and we’re here to help you.”

The Founder of Christianity counseled: “Fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.” Rumkowski’s successful despotism indicates that, in far too many cases, he had managed to drain the vitality and self-respect of his victims’ souls well before he permitted the atrocities that Nazism carried out against their bodies.

Do not the post-Christian West’s “democratic” regimes — whether they call themselves “right-wing” or



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“left-wing” — provide the perfect echo of Rumkowski’s 1942 demands? After all, they butcher millions of our babies in abortion mills on the taxpayer’s dime. They subject millions of our adolescents to totalitarian propaganda (enlivened by periodic Columbine-type spree-killings) in what passes for our public education network: a propaganda enforced by classroom pharmaceuticals. They steal the firearms of a law-abiding citizenry, and they never do so with more enthusiasm than when — like ex-Prime Minister John Major in Britain and ex-Prime Minister John Howard in Australia — they mendaciously call themselves “conservatives”. When not softening us up through these methods, they merely truckle to the vilest Hollywood pornographers.

And in everything they do, they live in hope (often enough, heaven knows, a justified hope) that any opponent with a recognizably adult view of the world will simply die off, so that the young may be captured and forever cowed. Their cry is constant: “Fathers and mothers: Give me your children!”

Photo: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski



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