



Rumkowski, Mordechai Chaim

(1877--1944), Chairman of the *Judenrat* in the Lodz ghetto in Poland. Formerly an unsuccessful businessman and an orphanage director, Rumkowski was appointed *Judenrat* chairman on October 13, 1939, after the German invasion of Poland. Like all *Judenrat* heads, Rumkowski was torn between helping the Jewish population in the ghetto survive, and giving in to the demands of the German authorities. Rumkowski, however, is considered to be one of the most controversial of all *Judenrat* leaders, in that he often cooperated with the Germans and treated the Jews of his ghetto dictatorially.

Rumkowski reported directly to the German ghetto administration, which was headed by Hans Biebow. He was completely responsible for everyday life in the ghetto: providing food, housing, heat, work, and health and welfare services for the suffering ghetto population. Rumkowski controlled all aspects of the ghetto, even its cultural life. When rabbis were forced to stop working, he himself began performing marriages. His picture even appeared on the ghetto's money. Rumkowski was also responsible for setting up 120 factories, which employed thousands of the ghetto's Jews, all employed in producing goods for the Germans. Rumkowski believed that if he could create a productive and vital work force for the Nazis, then they would not destroy the ghetto.

Rumkowski also believed that in order to save the ghetto as a whole, he would have to cooperate with the Nazis and give in to their deportation demands. By the end of 1941, the extermination camp at Chelmno had been established and the Germans forced Rumkowski to organize the deportation of a portion of the ghetto population. Initially, Rumkowski tried to convince the Germans to reduce the number of Jews to be deported. However, the Germans refused and made Rumkowski responsible for deciding who was to be deported. During the first 5 months of 1942, 55,000 Jews from Lodz were sent to their deaths at Chelmno.



During the second week of September 1942, another deportation was carried out. The Nazis demanded that Rumkowski turn over all children and old people. He cooperated with their demand and calmly asked families to surrender their children. Twenty thousand Jews were brutally rounded up and sent to Chelmno. Subsequently, there was a respite from the deportations, strengthening Rumkowski in his belief that keeping the peace and working for the Germans, would help prevent further deportations. During that period of time, the Lodz Ghetto was left alone while other ghettos all over Poland were being destroyed.

However, by the late spring of 1944, the Soviet army was advancing toward Lodz. The Nazis decided to liquidate the Lodz Ghetto. Rumkowski was forced to arrange the deportation. From June 23 to July 14, 1944, approximately 7,000 Jews were sent to Chelmno. The Jews of Lodz resisted the deportations passively, leading the Nazis to decide to liquidate the ghetto immediately, with SS and German police units carrying out the evacuation. The Germans closed the ghetto's factories and dissolved all *Judenrat*-run institutions. The Jews were now taken to Auschwitz. Rumkowski encouraged the Jews to calmly report for deportation, but they ignored his request. The Germans completed the liquidation of the ghetto in late July and August, sending the Jews to their deaths. Only a few hundred Jews managed to hide successfully. Rumkowski and his family were not spared---they were deported to Auschwitz on August 30, 1944, and were murdered there. Lodz was liberated by the Soviet army on January 19, 1945.

Some historians view Rumkowski as a collaborator and traitor. Others believe he made a serious, yet flawed, attempt to rescue as many Jews as possible.