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A Deadly Dream

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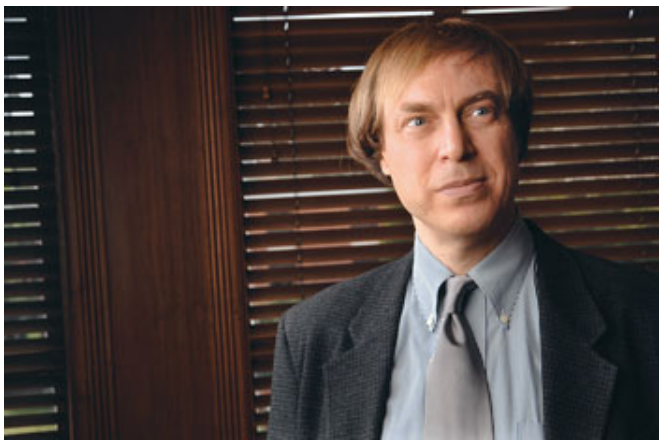
In his new book, History Professor Gordon Horwitz examines how the Nazi plan to remake a Polish city led to the deaths of 200,000 of its Jewish residents.

Story by Rachel Hatch



Professor of History Gordon Horwitz has written two books on the Holocaust. "It can be draining at times," he says, "but I think it's important work to (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Historians have explored the horrors of the Holocaust during World War II for decades, whether through the eyes of the Nazi officials, or through the memoirs of victims. Few, however, have looked at the dynamic interaction between the camps and ghettos created by the Germans and the cities that surrounded them.

Associate Professor of History Gordon Horwitz examines the chilling evolution of the Holocaust as it came to Łódź, Poland, in his book, *Ghettostadt: Łódź and the Making of a Nazi City*, published in May by Harvard University Press. Among many favorable reviews of the book, Publisher's Weekly called it a "historical tour de force," and noted that Horwitz employs "a graceful style rare in academic history."

"What interested me most was to explore the relationship between the ghetto and the city," says Horwitz, who holds his doctoral degree from Harvard and joined Illinois Wesleyan's faculty in 1989. He has been researching and writing the book, his second, for more than a decade.

Following artillery bombardment, advance German troops entered the industrial city of Łódź on Sept. 8, 1939. Located some 80 miles southwest of Warsaw in the center of Poland, Łódź was one of the first occupied cities to be annexed to the Third Reich. Quickly, Horwitz says, the Nazis set about remaking the city into a pristine and modern example of German ingenuity.

"This was a city that was undergoing radical demographic shift under the Nazis," Horwitz says, reflecting the Nazi goal to populate many Eastern Europe cities with "pure" ethnic Germans. "Today we would call the process ethnic cleansing."

Łódź possessed the second-largest Jewish population in Poland, with more than 200,000 Jews constituting a third of the city's residents. Under Nazi rule, their world was quickly "turned upside down. It became nightmarish," Horwitz writes in his book. "The German victory was understood to have granted license for open attacks on Jews wherever one might find them." Jews were roused from their homes and hung by their clothes in trees, forced to undress in public and then lined at gunpoint for mock executions and endured other humiliations and beatings in front of "mocking citizenry and soldiery who gather[ed] round to watch or to participate in the spectacle."

Meanwhile, German military personnel plundered Jewish households and later confiscated Jewish-owned businesses and assets. By May 1940, the Nazis officially sealed the ghetto where Łódź's Jews had been transplanted in the city's northern district. However, the ghetto was only intended as a temporary solution to the "Jewish problem."

"The Nazis were not sure what they were going to do with the Jewish population, but the first step was seizing their assets and enclosing them in a guarded district," Horwitz says, noting the Nazis would not begin to carry

out the so-called “final solution” of genocide until later. “It was always in the air, but the Nazis had to go through a period of consideration of what was possible. They had to figure out themselves what they were going to do.”

The book’s shifting narratives show the efforts of the Germans to turn Łódź — renamed Litzmannstädt, after a German World War I general — into a perfect expression of German ideals while simultaneously exploiting and destroying the Jewish populace, now hidden away behind barbwire in crowded tenements.

“What this book does is link those two worlds,” says Horwitz, who delved into newly available resources after Poland became independent in the 1990s. “New documentation, new visual evidence from that time period opened up possibilities.” Horwitz traveled to Poland and Germany, drawing from such resources as official Nazi reports and diaries of ghetto residents. Of particular interest was the local German newspaper, the Litzmannstädter Zeitung. “I looked beyond the war news on page one and into the interior sections, which dealt with events and the remodeling efforts to make the city a gleaming, cultural jewel.”

Horwitz noted how often the ghetto and its Jewish occupants were mentioned in articles praising Nazi achievements. “Their prospective vision, albeit filtered through the Nazi lens, reveals a great deal about the mentality of the new city fathers and the Nazi design,” he says. “You find — not unexpectedly — that they cannot help but make reference to the ghetto, to all that the Jews had supposedly done to harm the city.”

A Jewish policeman (above left) directs pedestrian traffic across the main street of the Łódź ghetto. The sign reads, “Jewish Residential Area — Entry Forbidden.” (Photo courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

As Horwitz writes in his book, “Repeated expressions of hatred signaled both a wish and a certainty: the fantasy of annihilating the Jews, the ever-repeated refrain, was an accompaniment to the daily stream of words that defined the political culture which the regime had impressed on the city and the land.”

Ghettostadt, which is the first major English-language study of the Łódź ghetto in a generation, is a continuation of Horwitz’s research of the Holocaust. His 1990 book, In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen, examined how civilians living in a small Austrian town related to atrocities being committed in public view at a nearby Nazi concentration camp. “I was mostly interested in bystanders, outside witnesses,” Horwitz says — a perspective on the Holocaust that is often hard to obtain from living witnesses and which had previously been unexplored.

“What emerges,” wrote McGill University History Professor Peter Hoffmann in his *New York Times* review of *In the Shadow of Death*, “is a disturbing picture in which criminality and moral sensitivity occupy narrow spaces at opposite ends of a spectrum, and in which the wide space in between is filled by fear, indifference and accommodation.”

Both of Horwitz’s books portray the striking dichotomy between the isolation and desolation of the camps and ghettos and the thriving life outside them. “We must examine a civilizational problem that arises when looking at the Nazis,” says Horwitz. In Łódź, he reflects, the Germans were “able to continue with their work — which was, of course, the work of annihilation — while at the same time enjoying the fruits of culture and civilization. I’m curious about this.”

Ghetto residents, including children, make shoes for the Nazi occupiers. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, who served as the ghetto's chief administrator, believed that hard work was the key to Jewish survival. (Photo courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Horwitz also analyzes the inner workings of the ghetto, and examines how Jewish leaders dealt with the German occupiers, especially the controversial Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, who was appointed by the Nazis as sole administrator of the Łódź ghetto.

Despite the Germans' violent oppression and imposed squalor and hunger, Rumkowski strived to set up as normal as life as possible for the residents. He established departments to deal with the ghetto's internal affairs such as housing, health care and food rations. He also attempted to make the ghetto a community that embodied Jewish culture, and implemented industry in the ghetto that supported the residents and later served as justification for keeping them alive. Still, many residents came to regard Rumkowski as a tyrant to his fellow Jews and submissive to the Nazi occupiers.

Rumkowski is perhaps best known for a speech delivered on Sept. 4, 1942, in which he implored parents to surrender all of their children under the age of 10 for deportation to the death camps or face the possibility that the Nazis would wipe out the entire ghetto. While some consider Rumkowski a traitor or Nazi collaborator, Horwitz provides a more sympathetic assessment. "Did he do what he thought was best to keep Jews in the Łódź ghetto alive? Yes he did. Was he a hero? No, he was not," he says.

In the end, Rumkowski held out the hope that "given sufficient time to wait out the Germans who, once defeated, would vanish, the gates of the ghetto would swing open, and like 'a miracle' of modern exodus, a remnant ten, twenty, even sixty thousand strong would walk through those gates back into the city and freedom," Horwitz writes in the epilogue of Ghettostadt. Instead, by the summer of 1944, the decision was made to commence with the liquidation of the ghetto's remaining 70,000 residents. Rumkowski and his family were murdered in Auschwitz.

By the time Soviet forces liberated Łódź on Jan, 19, 1945, much of the Nazi's plans for turning the city into their ideal metropolis were left unfulfilled. "But one thing had been accomplished," Horwitz writes, "and in astonishingly little time: the Jews of Łódź, a community of more than 200,000 souls, were gone."

Horwitz admits researching the horrors of the Holocaust can take a toll. "It can be draining at times, but I think it's important work to do. Perhaps you can call it a calling, or a mission, and that sustains me. I believe in what all historians do. In part, we are mediating the memory of another generation."