

In the shadow of Rumkowski

essay by **Olaf Haagenen**

The period of September 5–12, 1942, will leave indelible memories among the portion of the ghetto's population on whom fate smiles and who survive the war.

One week, eight days that seem an eternity!

Even now it is difficult to grasp what has occurred. An elemental force has passed through the ghetto and swept away some 15,000 people (no one knows the exact number yet) and life appears to have resumed its former course.¹

In the literature on the Łódź Ghetto, these eight days in early September 1942 are referred to only as “the Sperre”, derived from the general curfew (“Allgemeine Gehsperr”) ordered by the Germans while they rounded up children, the elderly, the infirm, and the unemployed for deportation to Chelmno (German: Kulmhof), a death camp about 55 kilometers away. *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto*, from which the quotation was taken, was a sort of collective diary written in secret by a group of ten or fifteen people in the Jewish Administration. It describes life in the ghetto, major events – such as the Sperre – and minor occurrences. (For instance, in a short entry from June of the same year, one reads that a recital had been held, “das einem klassischen Repertoire gewidmet war, im Programm u.a. Bach”.²) With its 3,500 pages, *The Chronicle* has been called “a source unparalleled among writings on the destruction of [the] European Jews”.³ Without it, Swedish writer Steve Sem-Sandberg could not have written his novel *De fattiga i Łódź* (2009; English translation, *The Emperor of Lies*, 2011). The two texts are so closely interwoven that it would not be unreasonable to argue that the novel is a rewriting of *The Chronicle*.

In retrospect, one man has become inextricably linked to the Sperre, and he was not among the 15,000 forced to leave the ghetto. The day before the deportations started, the Chairman of the ghetto, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (perhaps the most important character in Sem-Sandberg's novel), delivered a speech known in the Anglo-American reception only as “Rumkowski's ‘give me your children’ speech”. In front of the fire station in the ghetto, he informed the inhabitants – or the 1,500 of them who had assembled to hear him – that all children under ten and adults over sixty-five must leave Łódź.⁴ In the English translation of Sem-Sandberg's

book, the speech is reproduced over the space of four pages. Rumkowski explains that he has no choice. Either they take care of the matter themselves or the German soldiers will. He tells the crowd that he has negotiated the number who must leave the ghetto down from 24,000. And he defends his decision: by sacrificing some, he can save the ghetto. In Sem-Sandberg's version, the speech ends as follows:

So what is best? What do you want? For us to let eight or nine thousand people live, or look on mutely as all perish [. . .] Decide for yourselves. It is my duty to try to help as many survive as possible. I am not appealing to the hotheads among you. I am appealing to people who can still listen to reason. I have done, and will continue to do, everything in my power to keep weapons off our streets and avoid bloodshed . . . The ruling could not be overturned, only tempered.

It takes the heart of a thief to demand what I demand of you now. But put yourselves in my shoes. Think logically, and draw your conclusions. I cannot act in any way other than I do, since the number of people I can save this way far exceeds the number I have to let go . . .⁵

The deportation of children, the elderly, and the sick transformed Łódź from a traditional ghetto to an industrial slave city and established the motto for which Rumkowski would become known: work is our only way out.

Rumkowski's position in the ghetto and his role in the deportations have – naturally enough – attracted a great deal of attention in the literature on the Łódź Ghetto. Primo Levi brings up Rumkowski in his reflections on “the grey zone” and interprets him as an example of what absolute power does to a man.⁶ Rumkowski ran the ghetto like a dictator – with the help of an extensive police force – and talked about “his city” and “his Jews”. He printed his own ghetto currency with his image on it and got his own “court poets” to compose poems and songs about his accomplishments. In her critique of the *Judenräte*, Hannah Arendt places Rumkowski at one end of the scale and Adam Czerniakow, leader of the Warsaw ghetto, at the other. When Czerniakow was given the same order as Rumkowski, he took his own life.⁷ Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer devotes a few pages to Rumkowski in *Rethinking the Holocaust* from the early 2000s and asks: What

if the war had played out differently? What if the Red Army had stopped the advance only three or four days later than it did in July 1944? If it had, Soviet forces would probably have reached Łódź while there were still about 70,000 Jews in the ghetto instead of the fewer than 1,000 they found in January 1945. Would we then have erected a statue in Rumkowski's memory or executed him for having sent thousands of Jewish people to their deaths? Bauer's answer is, “Frankly, I would vote for the gallows, not the statue.”⁸

Sem-Sandberg has talked about Rumkowski in interviews as the “black hole” in his novel, that towards which everything is inexorably drawn, and has said among other things, “Immer heißt es in den Erinnerungen an Łódź: Rumkowski entschied dies oder das. Als ob keine Deutschen dagewesen wären”⁹. The observation is important, not as an absolution of Rumkowski but more as a reminder that a historical event must be interpreted against the horizon of its time. Ruth Klüger writes about the distorted image of the Holocaust that survivor stories are always in danger of producing. At one place in her memoir *Landscapes of Memory*, she stops and reflects:

Now comes the problem of this survivor story, as of all such stories: we start writing because we want to tell about the great catastrophe. But since by definition the survivor is alive, the reader inevitably tends to separate, or deduct, this one life, which she has come to know, from the millions who remain anonymous. You feel, even if you don't think it: well, there is a happy ending after all.¹⁰

In the encounter with the history of the Łódź Ghetto, posterity faces a similar problem: how should we regard all of those who stood in Rumkowski's shadow, all of those who did not step onto the stage of history, but went to their ruin in the wings? Or, taken to the extreme: how can we avoid reducing Łódź to an example of Levi's grey zone or the role of the *Judenräte* in the Final Solution? How can we look past the arguments in Rumkowski's speech outside the fire station on the 4th of September, 1942, and catch sight of his audience?

In his essay “Even Nameless Horrors Must Be Named”, published in autumn 2011,¹¹ Sem-Sandberg argues that it is time to lift the “aesthetic state of emergency” that has surrounded witness literature and made it a forbidden area for anyone who has not personally and physically experienced a Nazi

concentration camp. He discusses the Russian writer Varlam Shalamov's suite of short stories, *Kolyma Tales* (published in Russian in 1954), which describes life in a Russian labor camp, and suggests Shalamov as a possible role model. When Sem-Sandberg describes the world of the camp in Shalamov's work, it is tempting to read it as an indirect interpretation of the ghetto he himself has created in *The Emperor of Lies*:

The world of the labor camp with its gigantic superstructure and the barren landscape all around does not merely serve as a backdrop, but develops by degrees into a hellish space with clearly delineated boundaries, governed by its own laws. Here are the mines to which a constant supply of new work brigades are sent, to be used up like so much dross; but also the camp hospitals, a clinical world within a world, to which those with the right contacts might have the good fortune to be temporarily or permanently transferred. And last but not least: the world of professional criminals that constitutes the foremost circle of the camp, those with the true power, its aristocracy.¹²

As one reads the book, the map provided at the back of *The Emperor of Lies* changes from a collection of street names to precisely that which Sem-Sandberg finds in Shalamov: a world apart, one with its own inner context and logic. Roughly in the middle of the ghetto lies Baluty Square, a neutral barbed-wire enclave where raw materials are brought in and finished products taken out, the only place where there is any interaction between Germans and Jews. Rumkowski's office and the Central Office of Labor, which coordinates all production in the ghetto, are here. "You could call this square the stomach of the ghetto."¹³ Just a few streets away, we find the ghetto's Department of Statistics, often called simply The Archive. This is where the ID cards all Jews must carry at all times are made, and where various pieces of informational material supposed to document the work done in ghetto factories and workshops are published. But it is also where a small group of people secretly compile *The Chronicle* and describe everything that does not fit the official image of Łódź: the food shortages and diseases, the deportations and violence. A historical narrative for the future is written in the archives, "the heart of the ghetto."¹⁴ Marysin, in the northeastern part of the ghetto, is an area of wooden houses, garden plots, and greenhouses where the upper echelons of the ghetto go to escape the summer heat and dust trapped between the tenements in the center of the ghetto. The cemetery is located at the edge of Marysin where the ghetto borders on the rest of the city. It is hidden behind high walls. While the more affluent residents of the ghetto take a vacation, the gravediggers work seven days a week. They have to in order to keep up: thousands of new graves are needed every year. The Green House, one of the orphanages Rumkowski has set up in the ghetto, is just a stone's throw from the western wall of the cemetery. In addition, there are places like the hospital and police station (also known as the Red House), the homes of the various families we come to know – and, lest we forget, the private apartments of the Rumkowski clan, where an utterly disastrous family life plays out in the midst of the surrounding catastrophe.

Sem-Sandberg has built a world around Rumkowski and populated it with persons from all levels of the ghetto hierarchy – the list of characters at the back of the book contains more than 80 names. Łódź is seen through the lives of people who are often far from the center of history, regardless of

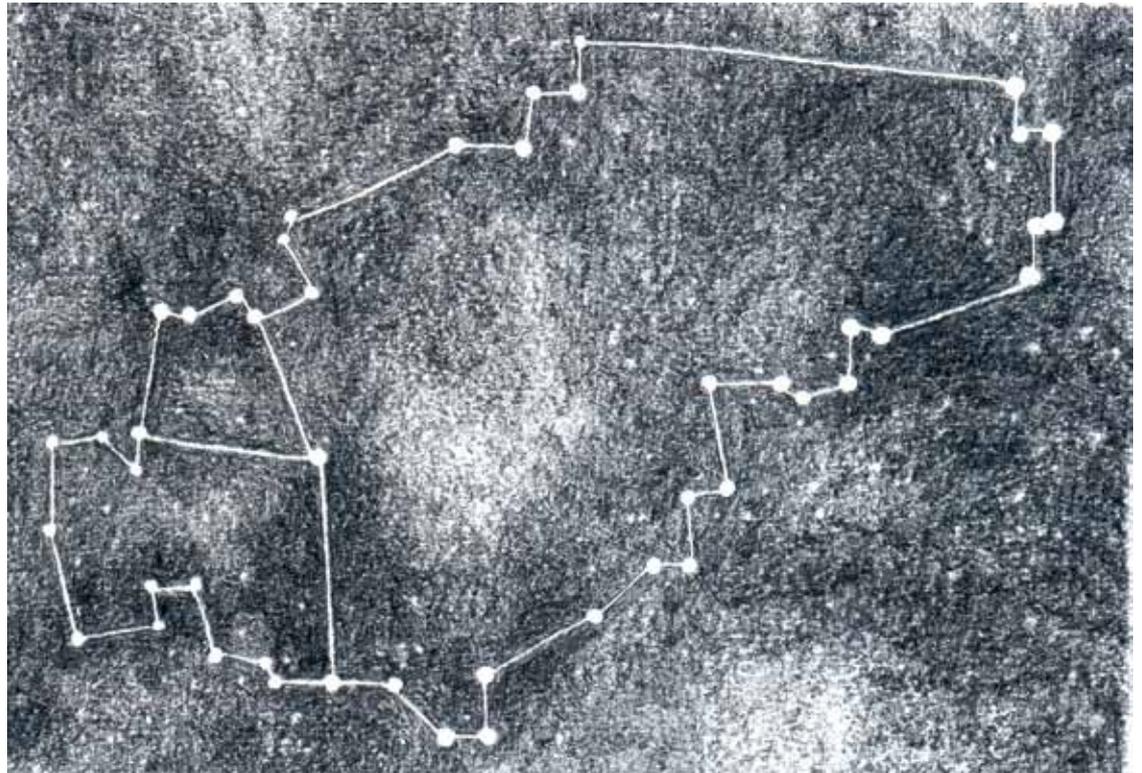


Illustration: Moa Thelander

whether placed in the German ghetto administration offices or in Rumkowski's office.

This is an unfamiliar (yet recognizable) world for most of us, and the few who can claim first-hand knowledge of it – the survivors, the witnesses – are dying out. Sem-Sandberg and *The Emperor of Lies* have – in the otherwise largely positive reception – met with the same objections made against all works of fiction by writers who have not personally *been there*: Why fiction? By what right?¹⁵ Sem-Sandberg has little to say in answer to the second question. He is a non-Jewish-Swedish citizen born to Norwegian parents, and he has no biographical or familial ties to the destruction of the Jews. And, one might well add, not only is he a product of neutral and innocent Sweden, but he made his first literary forays in the most unrealistic of all genres: science fiction.¹⁶

Let us linger a bit on this last point. Let us try, for a moment, to amalgamate two types of texts that seldom or never intersect, the survivor testimony and the science fiction story, and ask whether there are any parallels between the two that might be productive of further reflection. One striking characteristic of the testimonies is in fact how often arrival at the camps is described as being like landing on another planet, a place outside and disconnected from the world as we know it. In his essay "Orfeus i spegelstaden" [Orpheus in the city of mirrors], published in 2003, Sem-Sandberg argues that the defining characteristic of science fiction is the creation of worlds: the science fiction author cannot rely on our shared, presupposed reality (as a traditional realistic novel can), but must build a new world from the ground up for the reader, a world that may encompass everything from linguistic peculiarities (neologisms) to metaphysical superstructures.¹⁷ In one interesting passage, Sem-Sandberg discusses the work of Polish writer and journalist Ryszard Kapuściński and argues that Kapuściński's position on the borderline between journalism and literature is comparable to the science fiction author's attempts to conjure up an unknown world:

The genre in which Kapuściński works, literary reporting, is found between two other genres/ languages, news journalism and fiction, and it is precisely because it is there, *in the middle*, marginal in a way to both, that it must constantly rediscover and repopulate the world. Simply referring to an existing reality, as the journalistic text does, is not enough. Relying on conventional literary forms and means of expression is not enough either. It is precisely the position of literary reporting *on the margin* that helps release a slew of literary energies that would otherwise have remained latent. In this case, it resembles science fiction.¹⁸

Can we imagine a similar position *on the margin* for the literature that attempts to describe twentieth-century camps? A literature that does not attempt to meet Medusa's gaze (Primo Levi), but instead attempts to recreate in literature – with all forms and means available – the world, the strange planet where Medusa might roam? Elie Wiesel's repudiation of any form of fiction in the encounter with the Holocaust ("A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka"¹⁹) is well known. Imre Kertész's utterly opposed contention has received less attention. A concentration camp, he argues, is imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality. "Auch nicht – und sogar dann am wenigsten –, wenn wir es selbst erleben."²⁰

In one place in her previously mentioned memoir, Ruth Klüger writes about Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* and ponders over Lanzmann's obsession with the specific places where the exterminations took place: he wants to know what they looked like then, down to the last detail. "Lanzmann's greatness", she writes, "depends on his belief that place captures time and can display its victims like flies caught in amber."²¹ One might well make a similar argument about Sem-Sandberg and *The Emperor of Lies*. The world of his liter-

ary creation in the novel would not have been much more than a “simple backdrop”, to use his own words, if it had not also captured the peculiar temporality of ghetto life. From the privileged viewpoint of posterity, it is obvious that the Sperre was a watershed in the history of the ghetto. This interpretation is confirmed by *The Chronicle*, in which the historic significance of the deportations is immediately established. The articulative stance and perspective of the author behind the diary entry of September 14, 1942, is, however, quite interesting. Seen in the light of the institutionalized memorial culture surrounding the extermination of the Jews that has emerged over the last 15 or 20 years and the insistence upon the unique and incomprehensible nature of the Holocaust, the following sentence is noteworthy: “Noch heute fällt es schwer, sich bewusst zu machen, was es eigentlich war.” *The Chronicle* diarist writes this entry only two days after the deportations, and in the very next sentence, he or she adds that life is moving on “im alten Flussbett”, despite the typhoon that has struck the ghetto. In the next entries in *The Chronicle*, the deportations are briefly mentioned on a few occasions, but by October, there is scarcely a trace of them anymore. The difference – and it is a world of difference – between our own recognition of the historical significance of the deportations and that of the ghetto inhabitants (as portrayed in *The Chronicle*) is that the inhabitants did not have the opportunity to rest upon this recognition. If those who remain are to have any chance, they must find their way back to the rhythm of ghetto life. The remembrance work – which we are so inclined to talk about today – had to wait until after the war, and for those who were lucky enough to survive.

The conflict between the ghetto’s horizon and that of posterity is already clearly discernible in the first section of the prologue to *The Emperor of Lies*. We are in the first days of September 1942, the beginning of the Sperre, and we find ourselves in Rumkowski’s office on Bałuty Square. Rumkowski has just received the order that children and the elderly are to be deported:

That was the day, engraved for ever in the memory of the ghetto, when the Chairman announced in front of everyone that he had no choice but to let the children and old people of the ghetto go. Once he had made his proclamation that afternoon, he went to his office on Bałuty Square and sat waiting for higher powers to intervene to save him. He had already been forced to part with the sick people of the ghetto. That only left the old and the young. Mr. Neftalin, who a few hours earlier had called the Commission together again, had impressed on him that all the lists must be completed and handed over to the Gestapo by midnight at the latest. How then could he make it clear to them what an appalling loss this represented for him? *For sixty-six years I have lived and not yet been granted the happiness of being called Father, and now the authorities demand of me that I sacrifice all my children.*²²

The temporal space that opens here is vast and complex. The first sentence puts us in a place in the future, looking back: The day that has passed is already part of collective memory (“engraved for ever in the memory of the ghetto”). But the perspective changes over the next two sentences, and by the fourth sentence, we are in a *now* (“That only left the old and the young”), that is, before the inscription in the col-

lective memory of the ghetto, at an unspecified time on this particular day. The lists have to be ready by midnight, but it is impossible to know whether that time is two hours or ten hours away. In the two final sentences, historical time utterly dissolves and we move – in a two-part movement from direct discourse to free indirect discourse – into Rumkowski’s mind (“*For sixty-six years I have lived*”).

What is going on in this very first paragraph of the novel? Isn’t it that the temporal structure of *The Chronicle* is being written into the novel and, one might add, that the first building blocks of what will be the novel’s depiction of the ghetto world are being laid out: Bałuty Square, Mr. Neftalin, etc.? We move from the retrospective position of the historian to the immediate perceptions of those involved, from the history of the ghetto to the uncertain horizon of events as they unfold. The observation that Rumkowski has been sitting in his office “waiting for higher powers to intervene to save him” underlines this transition. Rumkowski longs for a glimpse into God’s book in which all the events and days ordained for him are written (Psalms 139:16). He wants to know whether Divine Will is controlling what is happening around him, a confirmation that he is making the right decisions. Or, in more secular terms, he wants to see himself from the retrospective viewpoint of posterity.

It is here that Sem-Sandberg’s novel unfolds: in the intersection between the knowledge history has given us and the perspective from inside the ghetto, between the documentary reconstruction and the creative power of fiction, between that which is now a city district in Łódź and that which once was, for 140,000 people in July 1941, the entire world. ✖



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references

- 1 Lucjan Dobroszycki, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–44*, New Haven and London 1984, p. 250. “Die Zeit vom 5. – 12. September 1942 wird bei dem Teil der Gettobevölkerung, der den Krieg überleben wird, eine unauslöschliche Erinnerung hinterlassen. Eine Woche! 8 Tage, die eine ganze Ewigkeit zu sein scheinen. Noch heute fällt es schwer, sich bewusst zu machen, was es eigentlich war. Ein Taifun, der ca. 15 000 Personen /eine genaue Zahl kann noch niemand sagen/ von der Oberfläche des Gettos weggefegt hat, hat gewütet und trotzdem fließt das Leben erneut im alten Flussbett.” Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried & Jörg Riecke (eds.), *Die Chronik des Gettos Łódź/Litzmannstadt, 1942*, Göttingen 2007, p. 452.
- 2 Ibid., p. 303.
- 3 Lucjan Dobroszycki, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–44*, ix.
- 4 Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten*, Göttingen 2006, pp. 292–309.
- 5 Steve Sem-Sandberg, *The Emperor of Lies*, translated by Sarah Death, London 2011, pp. 260–261.
- 6 Primo Levi, “The Grey Zone”, in Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, London 1989 [1986], pp. 22–51.
- 7 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London 2006, p. 119.
- 8 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven and Lon-

- 9 don 2002, pp. 130–132.
- 9 “Bist du es, der bestimmt wer sterben soll?”, interview in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2011-09-17.
- 10 Ruth Klüger, *Landscapes of Memory: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, London 2004, p. 164.
- 11 I have quoted the essay “Even nameless horrors must be named” as it was published on Eurozine.com on 2011-09-23 and accessed 2011-10-05: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-09-23-semsandberg-en.html>. The essay is a revised version of two texts, “Även de onämbara fasorna måste namnges” [Even nameless horrors must be named] and “Snart är vi alla vittnen” [Soon we will all be witnesses], published in *Dagens Nyheter* on 2011-01-27 and 2011-04-26, respectively.
- 12 Steve Sem-Sandberg, “Even nameless horrors must be named”, at eurozine.com.
- 13 Steve Sem-Sandberg, *The Emperor of Lies*, p. 42.
- 14 Ibid., p. 390.
- 15 Historian and art historian Simon Schama, for instance, ends his review of the English translation with the following blistering reproof: “It makes you wonder what Sem-Sandberg thought he was doing when he perpetrated this lumbering monster of a novel. Also it makes one meditate on the relationship between personal experience and moral power needed to take on this kind of subject. I am not of the school that believes a writer must have survived the camps in order to have written decent fiction about them. But one can’t help reflecting that when works such as Solzhenitzyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*, and HG Adler’s astonishing *Panorama* draw the strength of their narrative from direct memory, and their own non-fiction accounts, there may be something to the connection. Besides their raw witness to an evil so unspeakable as to be all but unwritable, Sem-Sandberg’s misbegotten effort is just a 672-page cautionary footnote.” (*Financial Times*, 2011-07-15)
- 16 Sem-Sandberg wrote a series of science fiction books in the late 1970s, although he considers *De ansiktets lösa* [The faceless] from 1987 his actual debut.
- 17 Steve Sem-Sandberg, “Orfeus i spegelstaden”, in Lars Jakobson, Ola Larsmo & Steve Sem-Sandberg, *Stjärnfall: Om SF* [Falling star: On Sci-Fi], Stockholm 2003, p. 124.
- 18 Ibid., p. 135.
- 19 Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration”, in Elliot Lefkowitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at the Northwestern University*, Evanston, IL 1977, p. 7.
- 20 Imre Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch* [English translation: *Galley Diary*], Reinbek 1999, p. 253.
- 21 Ruth Klüger, *Landscapes of Memory*, p. 73.
- 22 Steve Sem-Sandberg, *The Emperor of Lies*, p. 11.