

Title

Modernism in the Lodz Ghetto. A Tentative Interpretation of Forgotten Holocaust Documents

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Abstract

The author undertakes an initial analysis of the albums and posters produced in the Graphics Office of the Lodz Ghetto. Executed in a modernist style, with the use of photomontage techniques, the official propaganda documents—ordered by the Judenrat, headed by Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski—have not yet been the object of detailed research. Michna places them in the context of modern graphic design of the interwar period. Analyzing these materials as a precise medium for content, he treats them as an expression of mimicry—a survival strategy adopted by the Jewish ghetto authorities as part of the goal of turning the closed district of occupied Lodz into a rationally organized city-factory. He asks why this material has been overlooked and marginalized by researchers and considers the status of the documents. Drawing on Dorota Głowacka's conception, he categorizes the material as a kind of “negative testimony”—a distorted image that may nevertheless help us see other aspects of the Holocaust and its commemoration.

Art of (from) the Holocaust¹—art from the ghettos and camps—has met with growing academic interest.² In analyzing these works, researchers have most of all focused on art that appeared for individual reasons—be it the artist's commitment to documenting tragedy or, on the contrary, a need to escape from misery and suffering, at least for a moment.³ To a lesser extent there has been interest in the official art of the period—art commissioned in the camps by the Nazis or artefacts commissioned by the *Judenrats*.⁴ This work was supposed to express the agreed message and follow the stylistic preferences of the “clients.” Since they are not the result of the free creativity of artists, these works have often been ignored or assumed to be insincere or second-rate. These “commissions” might be seen as collaborating with the enemy,⁵ or as a way of obtaining essential items or graphic materials.⁶ The albums and posters I analyze here—official visual material produced in the Lodz Ghetto Graphics Office—do not easily fit into the framework above. Because they are visual propaganda created by Jews about Jews, intended to create a false image of the ghetto per the political plans of the head of the Judenrat, Chaim Mordechaj

Rumkowski.⁷ These plans can be viewed as a survival strategy, something that also becomes visible when we look carefully at the albums. The form and techniques used in these documents draw on the achievements of the avantgarde and its call for modernization and the rationalization of production for effectiveness and efficiency. Rumkowski drew on these ideals when coming up with his conception for saving the ghetto. He adopted a strategy of mimicry as a way of dealing with, and securing an important place within, the economy of the III Reich.

This fictional narrative was created to build the desired image of a closed ghetto and its society of inhabitants—both for visiting German industrialists and for future generations of Jews. This narrative is a construction and we still need to find the key to unlocking and understanding it. In undertaking the challenging interpretation of these documents, with their unclear status, I will reach for tools provided by various academic disciplines. Using the history of art, I consider the artistic context. What were the trends of avantgarde or commercial design that inspired the work of the Graphics Office? These archival materials have been effectively removed from art history, so subjecting them to the techniques of the history of art amounts to an attempt to re-acknowledge them as artistic objects. Studying their form allows us to read the narrative they are a part of, a narrative for which modernist style was an integral part. These documents draw on paradigms whose use had very definite implications. Geometric, photomontage compositions were intended to suggest modernity and the rationality of the ghetto Rumkowski managed. In searching for the right way to describe these documents, I would like also to consider today's reception of the modern forms used then. Contemporary viewer may be struck not only by the use of constructivist photomontage,⁸ but also by the narrative, inappropriate today, of the ghetto as a modernizing initiative, a rationalizing utopia.⁹

I find it helpful to invoke Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization which connects the Holocaust and modernity and according to which "The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity."¹⁰ For Bauman, each of the "ingredients" of the Holocaust "was normal (...) in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world—and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society."¹¹ Bauman points to transformations of modernity which made the Holocaust possible, including: the growth of the role of the state at the cost of local communities, the emergence of a new bureaucratic apparatus where decisions are taken sequentially on the basis of rationality. These changes made possible the dehumanization and the essentialization of administrative action¹² and the separation of action and morality.¹³ He also reveals how narratives used in propaganda served to slowly marginalize, dehumanize and isolate the Jewish population. The Nazis created a picture of the Jews as lazy and indolent, the bearers of disease, making use

of characteristically modern sensitivities about productivity and hygiene.¹⁴ The narratives of the Graphics Office albums refer to the same ideas but present an image of Jews that is the opposite of Nazi propaganda. Hence, they can be viewed not as an obedient realization of Nazi policy, but rather as a response to Nazi policy in the context of modernity's values. We might call this counterpropaganda, as realized by Rumkowski. Following Bauman's suggestions, I consider whether we can use connections between *modernitas* and the Holocaust as a point of departure and thereby interpret the Lodz ghetto documents differently—and in the process change our perception of Rumkowski's survival strategy.

So, what is the status of these Holocaust documents being, as they are, examples of modern design? And do these "avantgarde margins"¹⁵ (perhaps "modernist" would be a better word) have the capacity to bear witness to the Shoah? Are they just false witnesses or in fact an example of "negative testimony, although being a warped version of history nevertheless reveals complex layers of ties and entanglements (...) in our recollection of the Holocaust"?¹⁶ Perhaps they do bear witness, in spite of all?¹⁷ How can we read these documents, documents that were intended to justify the policies of Rumkowski, in turn based on cooperation with the Nazis? I would also like to ask, drawing on the tools of memory studies: Why have the posters and albums that appeared in the Graphics Office (some hundreds of pages and some including high-quality photomontages) not been the subject of wider attention from historians and art historians?

The oft repeated guiding motto of the head of the Judenrat was *Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit* [Our only way (out) is work]. It describes Rumkowski's strategy, intended to enable the survival of ghetto inhabitants. His goal, based on modernizing assumptions, to transform the Nazi ghetto into a city-factory where all inhabitants worked, was to some extent achieved. The ghetto in Litzmannstadt (Lodz), liquidated in 1944, was ultimately the longest operating closed Jewish district under occupation.¹⁸ To ensure the efficient functioning of this "wire bound state,"¹⁹ an advanced administrative system was developed²⁰ which left behind a huge number of documents, including a unique collection of albums and posters made using photo-collage techniques. These were made between 1941-44 by Jewish artists employed in the Graphics Office—a unit specially set up to provide visual presentations of statistical data and answering to the Statistical Department. The compositions on the album pages and boards use their layout to connect text, graphs and diagrams with photo-montages of pictures taken in the ghetto. These materials had a variety of purposes and were aimed at different groups of recipients. The posters were sometimes decorative, for example, for use during ghetto celebrations and the visitations of Nazi delegations. The albums were produced as gifts for German industrialists on business trips to the ghetto, to give the impression of efficient factories operating in the enclosed district. They were also a kind of luxury gift for the German administration itself, for Rumkowski and higher-ranked

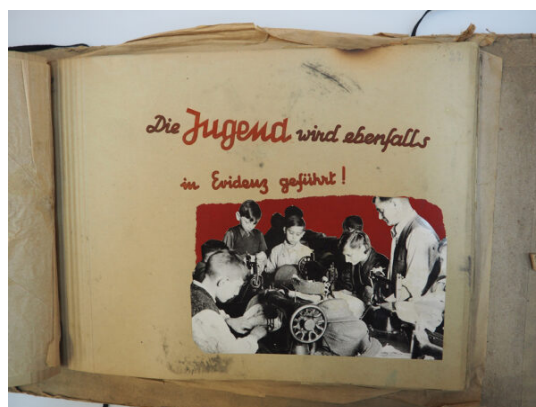
ghetto staff.²¹ They possess very developed graphic design and consistently present an image of the ghetto as a modern and rationally managed city of labor. Their style refers to Bolshevik propaganda and interwar industrial advertising, which in turn had drawn on the advances of the constructivist avantgarde and modern print theory.²²



Page from the Labor Department's album presenting statistics on labor mediation in August 1941, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/825, Catalogue 17.



Poster depicting production of luxury furniture, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. Part of a series of posters presenting the development of the Carpentry Workshops and the Upholstery Department. From the collections of the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/837, Catalogue 4.



Page from the Labor Department album showing youth vocational training. Slogan written on the page: The youth is also kept on record [of workers]!, Litzmannstadt

[Lodz] ghetto. From the collections of the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File. no. 39/278/0/12/825, Catalogue 22.

Research Status

The photographs from the Lodz Ghetto by Mendel Grossman and Henryk Ross are very well known,²³ yet the Graphics Office work which used the photography of these Jewish photographers has been consistently ignored by researchers. Apart from occasional mentions, their work has only been used by historians as illustrations—and not analyzed in published research.²⁴ Agata Pietroń has analyzed the albums themselves in her unpublished MA dissertation *Fotomontaż jako sposób opisu Zagłady. Analiza albumów fotograficznych z łódzkiego getta* [Photomontage as a Way of Describing the Holocaust. Analysis of Photographic Albums from the Lodz Ghetto], in which she has been able to establish a range of facts about the provenance of these documents. Pietroń based her research largely on eyewitness reports by people connected to the album's authors. As well as the albums prepared in the Graphics Office, Pietroń has analyzed Arie ben Menachem's conspiratorial album, lost after the war—an album not included in my analysis here of official documents. In describing the archive material, Pietroń considers individual pages rather than the overall narrative.²⁵ She considers the status of photomontage as testimony regarding the Holocaust, asking to what extent photomontage can be a medium for describing the Holocaust, despite the manipulation of photographs and the aestheticization involved.²⁶ According to Pietroń, these documents do bear witness to the Holocaust by means of their material composition—they are comprised of fragments of shots where montage and damage to the originals influence our perception of the result.²⁷ It is the very fragmentary and damaged nature of the pictures that makes possible metaphorical readings which reveal the Holocaust as the cause of these features.²⁸ Though the physicality of these documents is very much worthy of study, I would like here to draw attention to other features of these archive materials. I suggest we should read the narrative of the albums and their modernist style as evidence of Rumkowski's policies.

A key influence on research is always the original source material. In this case, the source material is also marked by its fragmentary nature. Out of the large number amount of visual documents produced in the Graphics Office, 29 albums and 101 posters/information cards survived²⁹—a mixture of original documents and photographic reproductions made for the ghetto archive. Sources on the context in which these documents were made are also thin on the ground. The majority of those working in the Graphics Office died in the ghetto or in death camps. We only have two statements from actual designers working in the Statistical Department. However, thanks to administrative documents such as payroll lists, I have been able to identify the names and surnames of artists not mentioned in these statements.³⁰

This article is reconnaissance into a research field and a proposal for interpreting these documents —documents which have not been studied in detail before. I will only touch on a few selected issues surrounding this material. For reasons of space, I will not give a detailed interpretation of individual pages and their ordering. The article is in the main based on the analysis of two albums stored in the State Archive in Lodz—from the Department of Labor and Department of Health.

Artistic Context

I am aware of the limitations of comparative analysis in art history, in particular when confronted with works which have, in effect, been doubly excluded from mainstream art historical narration. These works “not only” came about during the Holocaust, they were in Central Europe too, i.e. in a place where linear readings by the dominant modern approaches in art history can be problematic.³¹ Central Europe was the intersection for various artistic influences and for the development of their own variants.³² However, I think a careful reconstruction of the artistic context will allow these materials to be interpreted, but this reconstruction will have to proceed differently than standard practice for art of the Holocaust. Traditional interpretations see art here either as an expression of commitment to record the Holocaust or is a way of escaping reality by creating one’s own imaginative world, i.e. individual artists developing strategies of reparation or adaptation.³³ Strategies whose aims were to maintain a subject’s mental balance, to resist the dystopian reality of war, and to rehabilitate dignity. Jürgen Kaumkötter believes that art history has not faced up to art from the Holocaust. Instead, he believes, the history of art has left the field to history which as a discipline has ignored artistic aspects instead focusing on biographical evidence and the application of “reverse prophecy”—the imposition of contemporary knowledge about the Holocaust on the past. Moreover, Kaumkötter claims that this received approach involves taking on the perspective of the perpetrator because the artist is reduced to the status of a mere victim of genocide. He proposes instead to reinstate these artists to the canon by analyzing the artistic aspects of their work. At the same time, he warns against omitting the social and political conditions behind works of art from the Holocaust.³⁴ I think Kaumkötter is right and I would like to apply this approach to official art as well, where the interpretation of work is additionally complicated by its being a commission from the Judenrat bodies cooperating with the Nazis.

I have looked for the sources of the form taken by the photomontage compositions created in the Lodz Ghetto in the avantgarde and modernist traditions, both in the artistic “center” as well as in contexts that were local for the artists employed by the Statistical Department. The Graphics Office employed male and female artists from the ghetto, both those who had been living in Lodz before the war and Jews from western Europe, deported from Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna and Prague. Among those we can identify by name were: Szymon Szerman, Mojżesz Górewicz, Izrael

Jochimek, Luba Lurie, Maria Aleszova, Helga May, Eva Schneider, Arnošt Vinařský, Sara Fajtlowicz and Pinchas Szwarc—artists who survived, left testimony and whose work is most well-known.³⁵ This was an international group of artists made up of deportees to the Lodz ghetto at the behest of the Nazi terror machine. For them, working in the Office was a way to survive: they worked to satisfy propaganda and advertising requirements; it is hard to call them an “artistic milieu.” Since we have few sources, many questions connected to the appearance of these documents cannot be answered. We cannot define the roles of individual artists within the Office structure. In her testimony, Sara Fajtlowicz describes how the style embodied in their work was indicated by the Office leadership, probably by Samuel Erlich and Henryk Naftalin. She describes this style as “on a high level,” without precisely defining the sources of inspiration for the artists.³⁶ The majority of the artists from the Office, when they were working on their own, personal underground artistic work, did not invoke constructivism—which strongly suggests that this style was imposed on them from without.³⁷ The artists created a reasonably unified style for their work for the Judenrat and we cannot exclude the possibility that it was the Germans who provided the blueprints for the first albums.

The photo-collage compositions created in the Graphics Office were made of photomontages placed in a constructivist layout to which colored layers were added together with graphs and elements drawn from their surroundings, such as banknotes or stamps and sporadic texts. The history of photomontage as a separate medium, in a visual form approaching that adopted in the ghetto documents, began life with Dadaism and Soviet Constructivism. In describing these archival materials, Janina Struk pointed out that the artists drew on Bolshevik propaganda in creating the albums.³⁸ Both formally and narratively speaking, the photomontages created in the ghetto were closer to the compositions of Soviet artists than to the Dadaists. The former, after all, were not meant as a tool of social critique but as an element of state controlled propaganda, the product of a tightly controlled culture industry.³⁹ Their form was the result of an “aesthetics of the economy,” intended to bring art closer to industrial production. The images created were not so much a critique of the present, but a utopian, polished, ennobled vision of the future. They were a “language of ‘great lies’ masking the real face of the totalitarian system.”⁴⁰ In the ghetto albums, a similar utopian vision was created wherein the ghetto was presented as a space of modernization. But what was being hidden by the use of photomontage techniques was not the totalitarian realities of the regime but the tragic living conditions. The similarities extend to the level of form where the ghetto work also uses iconographic motifs and techniques of persuasion like the Soviet paradigm.⁴¹



Opening page of the Labor Department album, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/825, Catalogue 1.

The Second Polish Republic [II Rzeczpospolita] also witnessed an intensive period of development of graphics from the middle of the 1920s onward. This growth came out of the need to meet the demands of the market and advertising, but also out of the propaganda goals of the newly reborn state. As in the USSR, modern graphic design was taken up by artists advocating avantgarde art as a means of changing the world. Modernist style slowly took hold, and it was a style that had reached Poland from abroad—thanks to the establishment of international contacts by Polish artists—from the USSR, from the German Bauhaus and the Dutch De Stijl group.⁴² The new tendencies were represented by Mieczysław Szczuka, Teresa Żarnower, Władysław Strzemiński, Henryk Stażewski, Henryk Berlewi, and Tadeusz Peiper—the leading Polish avantgarde theoretician and the editor of “Zwrotnica” [Crossover] periodical. It was they who laid the foundations for modern design in the Second Polish Republic. Their proposals did not, however, directly impact the market because their ideas were too innovative for the still traditional tastes of this audience. Avantgarde activity from groups such as Blok, Praesens and the a.r. group influenced younger artists who drew inspiration from the 1930s avantgarde work, softening the impact of their predecessors.⁴³ Following the economic crisis of the 20s, the renewed growth from the mid-1930s was another impulse driving commercial design. When a significant group departed from functionalist conceptions at that time, Strzemiński continued to support these conceptions,⁴⁴ because for him one of the basic purposes of art was to influence society. He also invoked productivist ideas, expressing an acknowledgement of Taylor and Ford.⁴⁵

A place where Strzemiński’s postulates were realized, and where Pinchas Szwarc⁴⁶ acquired his education, was Publiczna Szkoła Doksztalcząca Zawodowa nr 10 [Public Vocational Training School no. 10]. Strzemiński became the director in 1931 and transformed the school program, aimed at developing the skills of printers and wall painters, using the ideas of avantgarde artists such as Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky and Jan Tschichold. He placed particular emphasis on the theories formulated by László Moholy-Nagy who in turn emphasized photography and

photomontage.⁴⁷

In the interwar period, photographic montages were widely used in publishing for mass audiences involving large circulation printing: the illustrated press, the covers of crime stories and romances, in propaganda printing and advertising.⁴⁸ As Andrzej Turowski has written: “We are here faced with an example of an almost perfect coincidence of rationalist rhetoric and constructivist style with popular culture.”⁴⁹ Modern style brought a specific set of values along with it—the idea of progress or a particular political stance.⁵⁰ The idea of modernization and progress, the official state ideology, was universal and could be invoked regardless of other differences in world view.⁵¹ This brief presentation can help us understand the context the ghetto’s visual documents appeared in. Despite the fact that they draw on modernist design trends, the ghetto albums and posters have not attracted the interest of art history until today.

The Discourse of the History of Art and Artefacts from the Holocaust

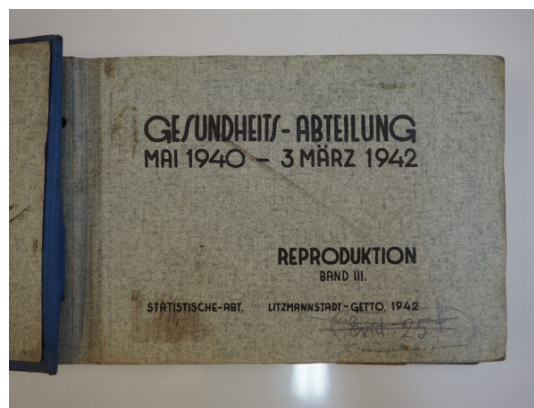
Magdalena Tarnowska has divided art from the Holocaust into two basic currents: works that invoke ideas of beauty and harmony; and socially engaged art that refers to current events. Within the second current, she has distinguished four functional variants: official art commissions; underground art; art expressing a personal need to document the Holocaust; and a fourth category which combines all of the previous three.⁵² She has reconstructed two lost examples of official art made in the Warsaw ghetto: the decoration of the Judenrat meeting hall, and the artistic framework for an exhibition of goods produced in the ghetto that took place on the Aryan side. According to Tarnowska, the Judenrat commissioned artworks above all out of a desire to materially support the artists gathered in the ghetto.⁵³ Official art in the Warsaw ghetto had an incidental nature and was quite different from the art of the closed-off district in Lodz. This disparity was due to the differences in the functioning and administration of the two ghettos.⁵⁴ Official commissions like those ordered by the Graphics Office have rarely been analyzed by researchers, in part because of their lower “status” in their connection to the Nazis. In comparing “true art” with that commissioned by the SS, curator Agnieszka Sieradzka wrote in the catalogue for the exhibition *Twarzą w Twarz. Sztuka w Auschwitz* [Face to Face. Art in Auschwitz]: “We are therefore dealing here with a negation of the definition of art, which above all should express internal human freedom. Nazi art is enslaved and debased, it is art at the service of the rulers. Yet alongside it, paradoxically, authentic art began to arise, kept strictly secret from the camp authorities as it came into being.”⁵⁵ Sieradzka also points to the adaptive character of works created to “maintain the mental agility and psychological equilibrium.”⁵⁶ The works produced in the Graphics Office of the Lodz ghetto are not the expression of free creativity; they are closer to what Sieradzka calls “the negation of the definition of art.”⁵⁷ Closer to “false art” in presenting a propagandist image of the

ghetto, they nevertheless, in my view, bear witness. These works were a kind of commission that provided a living. When working for Rumkowski, the artists did not identify themselves with the documents they made. Sara Fajtlowicz describes the resistance felt by the Graphics Office staff in making albums and posters containing false data. This discomfort led to the covert initiative to create boards and posters containing the correct, unmanipulated data, prepared in cooperation with members of the Department of Health.⁵⁸ For this reason, I consider the official Lodz ghetto materials part of a kind of reparative strategy,⁵⁹ not in the sense that interests us in an artist's biography, which usually focuses on the history of art, but as an expression of the commissioning party's strategy. Regular documents testify to Rumkowski's policies; they were a kind of mimicry which helped ensure survival, but were also a way—to paraphrase Piotr Słodkowski on Henryk Streng's wartime art—of recreating Rumkowski's world, including its most durable foundation—his faith in modernity.⁶⁰ In this way, the documents can be seen as a way of hiding the trauma of the ghetto by using modernist style, photomontage techniques and iconographic motifs.⁶¹

The documents also imitate modern persuasive communication. The form and medium have been precisely chosen to follow the modernist style used in pre-1939 state propaganda and capitalist advertising, with their leading values of modernization and rational management. The archive material that was officially created in the Litzmannstadt ghetto are examples of modern design, an expression and embodiment of the vigor of (reworked) avantgarde models.⁶² Despite this background, they have not been included in the developing area of the history of Polish graphic design. These documents have been left aside; they are “artistic margins” in Andrzej Turowski's conception, “abandoned and hidden in shame, or treated as a reserve for ‘the other,’ a side path”.⁶³ They do not operate as full-fledged objects d'art because of their dubious origins and difficult status, something that “shocks the history of art”.⁶⁴ Looking at this material from “the margins” is also a critical act, something immanent to Turowski's category: “norms do not apply in the margins, where the system collapses, where the whole is lost in digressions and ideology is reflected darkly in the mirror. The margins become the critical discourse of the text.”⁶⁵ So it may be useful to look at avantgarde discussions invoking modernization from the perspective of the albums from the Lodz ghetto—discourses that also refer to the rationalization of production, Taylorism and Fordism and all as part of biopolitical management, the ambiguous relations between power and capital, the dark sides of modernity.⁶⁶ On the other hand, the references to modern paradigms and the idea of modernization in these documents can be seen as a kind of survival strategy and a gesture towards reparation—an attempt to rehabilitate the dignity of the Jewish community both in the short term and in the future.

Prospective Historical Policy and Contemporary Amnesia

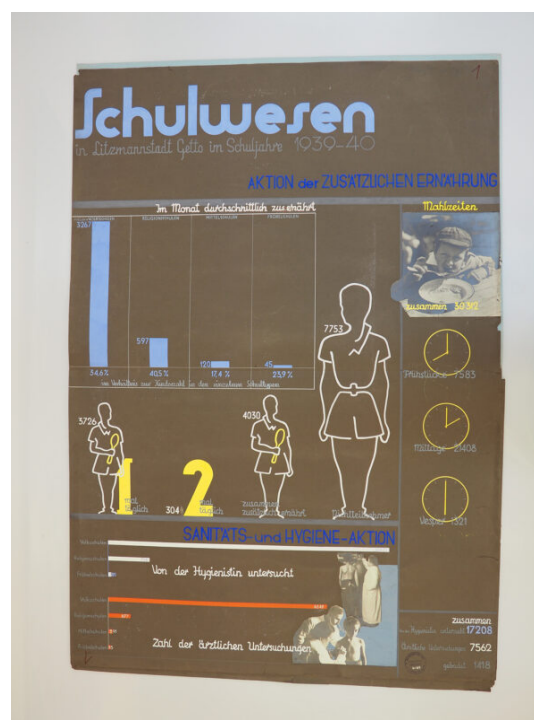
The documents created in the Graphics Office were not only produced to convince German industrialists to outsource production to the ghetto. They also thought of the future, about post-war public opinion. Several facts testify to this. A fully legal, perhaps it would be better to say “semi-official” Archive was set up in the ghetto. The Statistical Department worked closely with the Archive team and they commissioned albums with precise photographic reproductions. Thinking about the future is also present in references to a hypothetical time after the war—for example in the dedications of some albums and in Rumkowski’s own statements.⁶⁷ Finally, Sara Fajtlowicz points out another aspect of the initial purpose of these documents: they were originally intended for the *Gettoverwaltung*—the Nazi administration of ghetto and contained mainly data on illness and mortality rates. After some time, the heads of the Statistical Department proposed to Rumkowski that work might be carried out for the ghetto’s own needs. Fajtlowicz believed that the underlying purpose of these latter materials was to convince posterity of the smooth operation of the ghetto and the competences of the chairman of the Judenrat: “(...) these albums did not tell the truth, they were rather tendentious because Rumkowski wanted to show posterity that he had been a guardian and father to us. (...) I have the impression that he wanted to be seen that way in the future.”⁶⁸



Opening page for the third volume of photographic reproductions in the Health department album, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/830, Catalogue 1.

Jews in the albums are beings with agency. The modernization of the ghetto required dynamic work and the initiator behind this work, the Head of the Judenrat, is presented in the albums as a providential figure. This image is very far from the Rumkowski who wielded absolute authority over the district, being at the same time completely dependent on the Nazis. These works were made in a style a key feature of which was clarity and ease of comprehension. In this aspect they were to *look like* mass printed publications, even though they were handmade and in one copy only. This avantgarde-styled material was supposed to be easily consumed. Indeed, the way modern graphic techniques were used to present data in the form of graphs and pictograms might

suggest that the intended audience was broader than just specialists. The official materials from the Graphics Office presented the Jewish community in stark contrast to the main line of Nazi propaganda. Perhaps the albums were an attempt to challenge the stereotype of “Ostjuden”—whereby Jews were profiteering, parasitic, carriers of disease and representative of moral decay. The image of the ghetto’s society in the albums was similar to the presentation of “Aryans”. On the pages of the Labor Department’s album the machine was much emphasized—a symbol of progress and of efficient and rationally organized work. Apparatus for medical research and treatment—machines enabling modern diagnosis—was illustrated in the Health Department’s album. The pictures always show their subjects in action. Jewish doctors and nurses are actively aiding the sick. Equipment is shown in operation—or the effects are illustrated, for example the x-ray of a hand. Ghetto inhabitants were presented as hard-working, efficient, healthy, respecting hygiene and cleanliness. This portrait of the ghetto did not match the reality at all. But it was the intended image, potentially useful in the construction of a visual memory of the ghetto—a memory Rumkowski could monopolize, as per the orders given by him.⁶⁹ So we can view this archival material as a forward-looking historical policy, conducted by a Jewish administration possessed of a certain degree of autonomy. These were documents about the past—for the future. So, I would like to ask how do these materials affect today’s processes of memory? And what was the meaning of creating propaganda documents, intended for archives, in the context of the extermination of the actual witnesses, the liquidation of the fundamental bearers or memory—the people of the ghetto, the subject of this material? Who were these documents being archived *for*? Whose vision of the ghetto was being presented? And do they serve to any extent as testimony to the fate of the victims?



Poster illustrating nutrition campaign and sanitation-hygiene campaign. Part of a series of posters describing the education system in the ghetto in the 1939/40 school year, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. File. no. 39/278/0/12/798, Catalogue 1.



Page from the Labor Department album presenting the number of staff delegated to work outside the ghetto 1940-43, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/825, Catalogue 16.



Worker at machine. Page of the Labor Department album, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/825, Catalogue 19.



Reproduction of Page of Health Department album, presenting x-ray apparatus and dedicated personnel, Litzmannstadt [Lodz] ghetto. From the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [The State Archive in Lodz] (APŁ). File no. 39/278/0/12/830, Catalogue 2.

The propagandist documents created in the Graphics Office, with their false data and modernist style, are the antithesis of a commemoration of the Holocaust. They do not fit into the logic of testimony, they do not serve as a material trace of the Holocaust—those quasi relics, objects that came into contact with the bodies of the victims. This is why they have been overlooked for many years and left in their archives, becoming a resource of cultural memory, or more precisely an element of memory which Aleida Assmann distinguishes as *storing memory*, that which “contains what has become useless, obsolete and alien, the neutral, identity-abstract factual knowledge, but also the repertoire of missed opportunities, alternative options and unused chances.”⁷⁰ Ghetto documents have no chance of becoming the active memory (functional, living) “(...) which is a derivative of a process of selection, of linking, of constitution of sense (...). The unstructured, unconnected elements enter into functional memory as composed, constructed, connected.”⁷¹ These archival materials have completely lost their relevance on the level of narrative, messaging. After the Holocaust, they lost their target group and so became useless. But because they were a part of the corpus of ghetto documents, they were anyway archived and filed into history.

So, do these materials have the right to bear witness to the Holocaust? And if so, what kind of testimony do they represent? A false image of the ghetto was presented, propaganda aided by a modernist style which was already questioned by the authors themselves. And yet the narrative of these documents was developed during the Holocaust, before an ethics governing how we speak about the Shoah had been established. They present a partially effective, modernist political project *in statu nascendi*, using the leading means of expression of their time. In this sense, this is not false testimony but rather *negative testimony*, to use the concept introduced by Dorota Głowacka (“świadecko negatywne”)—one that does indeed distort the image, but which can nevertheless help us to see other aspects of the Holocaust and aspects of ourselves as we remember the Holocaust.⁷² These official Judenrat documents speak about mimicry—a survival strategy assumed by Rumkowski and something that should add nuance to our interpretation of the Chairman’s actions.⁷³ They are a resource which help us to see the kind of image of the ghetto Rumkowski *wanted us to see*. The ghetto albums are perhaps also a narrative in opposition to Nazi propaganda. And they can be viewed as a kind of reparative strategy, an attempt to cover over trauma by invoking modern ideas, ideas which might have offered hope to the leaders of the ghetto who were finally condemned to die in the Holocaust. If we look at the popularity of this messaging and the modernist style it was conveyed in, we could also claim that the majority of viewers placed their faith in modernity too. Jews were no exception when they also held out hope in the ideas of modernity in their dire struggle for survival. The moral ambiguity of these documents has led to their omission from study. Just as the form of these materials can be viewed as modernist margin, so the substance and manner of what they say about the Holocaust can be perceived as marginal testimony. This awkward, passed over and forgotten “ghetto modernism”

can enable us to view the survival strategy of the ghetto authorities in a completely new light.

Translated by Patrick Trompiz

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3. Tarnowska, 116. ↵
 4. Tarnowska, 111–115. ↵
 5. Kaumkötter, 57. ↵
 6. Kaumkötter, 66; Tarnowska, 119; Sieradzka, *Lagermuseum. Muzeum obozowe w KL Auschwitz*, 123. ↵
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 14. Bauman, 72. ↵
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 21. Pietroń, 54. ↵
 22. Pietroń, 56. ↵
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 25. Pietroń, 52. ↵
 26. Pietroń, 69–72. ↵
 27. Pietroń, 82–88. ↵
 28. Pietroń, 91. ↵
 29. Fourteen albums are stored in the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [State Archive in Lodz], eight in the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, two in the Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives (Itzhak Katzenelson Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Museum, Documentation and Study Center) of the Lohamei Hagetaot Kibbutz, one in the YIVO institute in New York, four in the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma [The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute] (ŻIH) in Warsaw. Almost all of the posters are stored in the State Archives in Lodz, except three stored in ŻIH. ↵
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 32. Turowski, “Fenomen nieostrości,” 88. ↵

33. Słodkowski, 370–390. ↵
34. Kaumkötter, 372–373. ↵
35. Testimony of Sara (Gliksmann) Fajtlowicz, born in Lodz, Poland, 1915, regarding her experiences as a painter in the statistics department of the Lodz Ghetto, Yad Vashem Archives, ID: 3557434; Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, “Ratowało mnie malarstwo” Rozmowa z Pinkusem Szwarcem” [“Painting Saved Me.” A conversation with Pinchas Szwarc], in *Łódzkie sceny żydowskie. Studia i materiały* [Jewish Scenes from Lodz. Studies and Materials], compiled by Małgorzata Leyko (Lodz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2000), 131. (Originally published in “Teatr,” no. 3 (1996): 14–22) ↵
36. Testimony of Sara (Gliksmann) Fajtlowicz, 4. ↵
37. The work of Sara Fajtlowicz, Szymon Szerman and Mojżesz Górewicz (Gurewicz) is kept in the Yad Vashem Museum and in the Jewish Historical Institute. ↵
38. Struk, 83–94. ↵
39. Stanisław Czekalski, *Awangarda i mit racjonalizacji. Fotomontaż polski okresu dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [The Avantgarde and the Myth of Rationalization. Polish Photomontage in the Interwar Period] (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2000), 33. ↵
40. Czekalski, 43. ↵
41. The figure of Rumkowski, dominating the composition on the first page of most of the albums, is shown in a similar way to Lenin in Gustaw Klucis’ photomontage *Out of this NEP Russia [Lenin’s New Economic Policy] We Will Create Socialist Russia*, and Warwara Stiepanowa’s *Effects of the First Five-Year Period*. The composition diagonally placed on the opening page of the Labor Department’s album includes the Chairman in the foreground. The message is completed with the slogan “unser einziger Weg ist ARBEIT” —with the keyword of the slogan capitalized and repeated—ARBEIT. This reveals the weight of language and the echo-like repetition appearing at the end of the phrase makes ARBEIT almost visually audible. ↵
42. An equally important context for the Office artists resettled out of Prague could be the modern designs of the magazines and books of Ladislav Sutnar and the photomontages of Karel Teige, Jindrich Styrski and Toyen (though they engaged with surrealist influences). See: Turowski, “Fenomen nieostrości,” 90. ↵
43. Piotr Rypson, *Against All Odds. Polish Graphic Design 1919–1949*, trans. Richard Biały (Cracow: Karakter, 2011), 46. ↵
44. Czekalski, 104. ↵
45. Turowski, *Budowniczości świata*, 264. ↵
46. Anna Saciuk-Gąsowska, “Uczniowie Strzemińskiego. Przyjaciele Żydzi” [Strzemiński’s

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47. Janusz Zagrodzki, “Obrazy typograficzne Władysława Strzemińskiego” [The Typographical Paintings of Władysław Strzemiński], in *Zmiana pola widzenia. Druk nowoczesny i awangarda* [Shift of Perspective. Modern Printing and the Avantgarde], ed. Paulina Kurc-Maj (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2014), 37. ↵
48. Rypson, 104. ↵
49. Turowski, *Budowniczość świata*, 155. ↵
50. Rypson, 90 and 134–137. ↵
51. Rypson, 158–160. ↵
52. Tarnowska, 117. ↵
53. Tarnowska, 123. ↵
54. Tarnowska, 125. ↵
55. Sieradzka, *Twarzą w Twarz*, 14. ↵
56. Sieradzka, *Twarzą w Twarz*, 16. ↵
57. Sieradzka, *Twarzą w Twarz*, 14. ↵
58. Testimony of Sara (Gliksmann) Fajtlowicz, 5. ↵
59. Słodkowski, 383. ↵
60. Słodkowski, 387. ↵
61. Słodkowski, 388. ↵
62. Turowski, *Awangardowe marginesy*, 186. ↵
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64. Turowski, “Fenomen nieostrości,” 100. ↵
65. Turowski, *Awangardowe marginesy*, 17. ↵
66. Bauman, xiii-xiv. ↵
67. Polit, 131. ↵
68. Testimony of Sara (Gliksmann) Fajtlowicz, 4. ↵
69. Pietroń, 21. ↵
70. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), 137. ↵
71. Assmann, 137. ↵
72. Głowacka, 301. ↵
73. See: Monika Polit’s book *Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski. Prawda i zmyślenie. Moja żydowska dusza nie obawia się dnia sądu*, which is the first biography of Rumkowski attempting to rewrite his story, and to question his dark reputation. ↵

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