

# Notes on a visit to Łódź, Poland

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*Following are the notes and impressions of a WSWW reporter from a recent visit to the Polish city of Łódź.*

## From the “Polish Manchester” to the “Polish Detroit”

Few cities in Eastern Europe have played as great a role in the history of the working class movement as Łódź. One of the major industrial centres of the Russian Empire, it was a key location in the development of the Polish socialist movement. Today, like perhaps no other city in Poland, it expresses both the devastating deindustrialization that has accompanied the restoration of capitalism and the still-present trauma of World War II and the Holocaust.

Unlike many other Polish cities, Łódź was not destroyed by the Nazis in the Second World War. Traces of the city’s industrial past can be seen everywhere, even though most of the once proud estates and factories have been abandoned and are in the process of decay.

The impact of this social counterrevolution cannot be missed by anyone walking through the city.

Most people on the streets are poor. The children look pale and tired; one man walking by has his face deformed by an open tumour. People in wheelchairs or with buggies are rarely seen due to the poor condition of the roads. As so often in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European bloc, the streets are so derelict that even healthy adults have to watch their step to avoid breaking limbs. The steep stairs to the decades-old tramways are difficult for everybody and, for the elderly, dangerous to climb.

The percentage of elderly people in the city seems very high. On a tram, perhaps six out of 10 people appear to be over 60. Over the past decade, an estimated 2 million people (out of a total population of 38 million) have left Poland in search of better-paid jobs abroad, the overwhelming majority of them young.

As foreign investors have flocked into Łódź, a small middle class has begun to emerge. Massive shopping malls, banks and hotels were built amid the ruins of what was once one of the most important industrial cities in the world. The few people with fashionable clothes and looks in the city centre appear out of place in this setting. One has the impression that the growing middle and upper classes in Łódź shun the streets, except for the main street, Piotrkowska, with its bars and cafes. For the most part, the better-off layers keep to the massive shopping malls, hotels and banking houses. The city’s working class population regards them with palpable suspicion and disaffection.

Łódź used to be famous for its massive textile industry, carried on in hundreds of factories in the 1920s. When Poland was reintegrated into the world capitalist market after 1989, cheaper textile products, particularly from China, quickly led to a total collapse of the Łódź textile industry. Many factories have now been turned into museums or clubs, while others just stand abandoned. The process of deindustrialization led to a dramatic population decline, with around 150,000 out of 850,000 leaving the city

since 1989.

Following Poland’s entry into the European Union (EU) in 2004, however, the process of deindustrialization was halted to some extent. On a 2012 list of the world’s most competitive countries for manufacturing, Poland ranked fourteenth and second within the EU. Of all the countries in east-central Europe, Poland has retained by far the most significant industrial basis. The “competitiveness” of industrial manufacturing in Poland has come at the price of poverty wages and deplorable living conditions for the working population.

Łódź is a primary example of this process. In 1997, the local government here established one of Poland’s 14 Special Economic Zones, which today counts among the 20 most lucrative SEZs in the world. Companies operating here include Bosch, Phillips, General Electric, Gillette, Dell, Hutchinson and Coca-Cola.

The dilapidated state of the city has led some to draw a parallel to Detroit. Both cities were once industrial centres and have been particularly hard hit by the process of deindustrialization that accompanied the social counterrevolution and, in Eastern Europe, the restoration of capitalism. Unlike Detroit, however, the period of Łódź’s flourishing goes back to the 19th century and the rapid, early development of European capitalism.

While Łódź has been mentioned in written records since the early 13th century, it was only a small trading town until incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1815 after the Treaty of Vienna, which settled the partition of Poland between Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire. Following a decree by the Russian tsar in 1816, German immigrants settled in the city and started to build the first factories. In 1825, the first cotton mill was opened, and in 1839 the first steam-powered factory in Eastern Europe began operations.

An island of industrialization in the economically still backward and predominantly agricultural Russian Empire, Łódź became known as the “Promised Land” (*Ziemia Obiecana*) and attracted aspiring entrepreneurs from all over Europe. Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda brilliantly depicts 19th century Łódź and the brutal conditions in this “Polish Manchester” in his 1975 film *Promised Land* (*Ziemia Obiecana*), based on the novel by Władysław Reymont.

By the late 19th century, Łódź had become one of the world’s most important textile manufacturing centres, exporting nearly everything to the Russian empire’s large market. Between 1823 and 1873, the city’s population doubled every 10 years, and between 1878 and 1895 it rose from 100,000 to 315,000. By the beginning of World War I, it had grown to half a million people. At the height of its industrial development, the city produced figures such as classical pianist Arthur Rubinstein, the son of the owner of a small textile factory.

The rapid industrial development meant that the city became the birthplace of the Polish working class movement and the centre for the emergence of its greatest Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg. The analysis of the Łódź textile industry formed an important part of Luxemburg’s dissertation and first major work, *The Industrial Development of Poland*. Łódź also became an important centre of the proletarian revolution of 1905, which saw mass strikes and protests throughout the Russian empire. The city continued to be a hub of working class movements throughout

the 20th century.

Later, under the postwar Polish Stalinist regime, some of the largest demonstrations and strikes took place in Łódź in the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly significant were the demonstrations and strikes during the “hunger summer” of 1981, when as many as 50,000 women took to the streets with their children to protest massive food shortages and poverty wages. Aside from butter and flour, virtually no food could be obtained in the city at that point. Banners held by the protesters included slogans such as “We have no strength to work”, “Hungry of all countries—unite!” and “Our children are going hungry”. The protests took place during the months before the proclamation of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981, in an attempt to crack down on the growing working class movement that was largely organised within the framework of the Solidarity trade union. By the early 1980s, the union had a membership of 10 million, far more than the ruling United Workers’ Party.

However, the control of the right-wing Solidarity leadership over the workers’ movement and its lack of a revolutionary perspective and party led to its eventual collapse. In a frank commentary published in the *New York Times* in 1981, Jerzy Kropiwnicki, deputy leader of the Solidarity movement in Łódź and a former student of the University of Wisconsin, stated: “An optimistic point is that half a year ago we couldn’t have organised such a demonstration because of fear of provocation or some kind of uncontrolled situation. Now we asked the police department to organise the traffic for the demonstration and they do it. They will stop any provocation that is outside the march and we will take care of the inside.”

Under conditions of an enormous economic crisis in all of the Stalinist regimes, and facing the danger of a working class rebellion, the bureaucracy in Poland struck a deal with the leadership of Solidarity and with its help paved the way for the restoration of capitalism. The upper echelons of Solidarity were elevated into the highest levels of government and business, both on a national and local level. Thus, the above cited Kropiwnicki became the head of the city of Łódź from 2002 to 2010 and a member of the now ruling, right-wing nationalist party, Law and Justice (PiS). By contrast, the lives of the vast majority of the workers that supported Solidarity in the hope of a better future are shaped to this day by the union movement’s betrayal and the restoration of capitalism.

## Traces of World War II and the Łódź Ghetto

While the social calamity inflicted upon the city’s population by the restoration of capitalism is visible to anyone visiting Łódź, the traces of World War II and the Holocaust are more difficult to discover, although these events also shaped the history of the city’s working class.

In August 1939, Stalin signed a pact with Hitler that provided for the partition of Poland into a German and a Soviet zone in case of a German assault on the country. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named after the German and Soviet foreign ministers, paved the way for the Nazi assault on Poland on September 1, 1939. Poland was divided into three different parts: the so called Reichsland Warthegau, encompassing the Western regions; the Generalgouvernement (General Government), roughly what is today Central Poland; and Eastern Poland, which, until the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, was under control of the Kremlin.

Due to its economic significance and substantial German population, Łódź was integrated not into the Generalgouvernement, but the Reichsland Warthegau. The city was renamed Litzmannstadt, after the German general who led the city’s occupation during World War I. At the central station, a plaque commemorates those deported to Germany as forced

labourers. Other plaques are dedicated to specific groups of workers and children who were also deported. Overall, some 3 million Poles, many of them underage, were employed as forced labourers under the Third Reich. Many of those deported from Łódź had to work for German companies such as Krupp, which is still in operation today, or the major electrical company AEG, which was only dissolved in the late 1990s.

What is less visible, but politically and historically still present, is the history of the Jewish community of Łódź, one of the most significant in Eastern Europe, and its final years in the Łódź Ghetto. In stark contrast to the area of the Warsaw Ghetto, where numerous memorials and plaques have been erected over the past three decades, only a few markers and signs recall the history of the Łódź Ghetto today. There is only one marker on the ground where presumably the Ghetto wall stood. The single largest memorial is at the Radegast station, from which tens of thousands of Jews were deported to Auschwitz and Chełmno. The memorial was inaugurated in 2004 and also includes a museum. However, in most of the city centre and the area of the former ghetto, almost nothing indicates to passers-by that they are treading the scenes of major historical crimes.

This is despite the fact that, as the last ghetto in all of Eastern Europe to be liquidated, in 1944, the Łódź Ghetto was not razed to the ground. Almost all buildings from this period are still standing.[1] Since other parts of the city had been more damaged during the war, after 1945 many of the city’s surviving inhabitants moved to this area. Today, it is one of the poorest working class districts, as it was before the construction of the ghetto.

Indeed, there are few cities whose history symbolizes the close interconnection between the fate of the working class movement and the Holocaust as much as Łódź. Here, the strong traditions of the socialist movement, which included in this city many members from the Jewish proletariat and lower-middle classes, bred the particular ferocity of the Nazi occupation forces.

The decision to institute the ghetto—one of the first to be built in occupied Poland—was made as early as September 8, 1939, by SS Oberführer Friedrich Uebelhoer. By April 30, 1940, the ghetto was sealed. At this point, some 164,000 people were living here, most of them Jews from Łódź. Since many of the better off layers of the Jewish population and the intelligentsia had been either deported to the Generalgouvernement or managed to flee to the Soviet-occupied zone before the ghetto was sealed off, the overwhelming majority of the ghetto inhabitants came from the working class and poorer sections of the middle class.

Later, tens of thousands of Jews from all over Europe, as well as several thousand Sinti and Roma, were deported to the ghetto. Until its liquidation in 1944, the Łódź Ghetto (in German, Litzmannstadt Ghetto) was home to some 200,000 people, most of whom were murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Chełmno (also known by its German name, Kulmhof). The head of the Nazi regime in the ghetto was Hans Biebow, one of the few war criminals who, after being handed over to Poland by the allies, stood trial and was sentenced after the war. He was executed in Łódź in June 1947.

Initially, the ghetto was intended to be only a transit point. However, by early 1941 the ghetto had acquired great economic significance for the German effort. Its inhabitants, including children above 10 for whom a special ghetto was set up, were employed as slave labourers for the German war machine. An estimated 90 percent of the ghetto’s production served the German Wehrmacht. The economic significance of the ghetto increased as the war dragged on and the Allies started to bombard German cities and industrial facilities. As the ghetto was not bombarded, many companies from the Reich sent their orders there. By 1943, there were 117 factories, workshops, sorting houses and merchandise warehouses in the ghetto. One German official compared it to “a vast enterprise”. In 1942-43, 95 percent of the adult population in the ghetto was working.

Working conditions in the ghetto were described in the following way:

“Labour in the resorts [i.e., the factories and shops] was exhausting and poorly paid. Deadlines were hard to meet; wages were low and arbitrarily set. When urgent orders came in, a 12-hour workday was compulsory. Working conditions at the resort were harsh: small, poorly lit and inadequately ventilated rooms, wholly unsuited to the various types of production. Many operations ordinarily done by machine had to be done manually for lack of equipment. The work quotas for Jews were very high when one considers that the workers were starving. [Hans] Biebow himself wrote in a report to his superiors in April 1943 that Jews were, for example, assigned a quota of 300-320 wooden shoe soles per day, while the daily quota for Polish workers in Lodz factories was only 180-200 soles.”[2]

The living conditions were no better. Before the deportations started, some 164,000 people had to live in 48,000 small rooms. The overcrowding became even worse after an additional 40,000 Jews from Austria, Germany and other ghettos in Poland and Czechoslovakia were deported to Łódź. One German survivor of the ghetto, Grete Stern, recalled in an interview with Yad Vashem [the World Center for Holocaust Research] that houses in the ghetto lacked basements and were therefore “moist right up to the roof, horrible conditions, no sewerage. In the winter they [the houses] were frozen and one could not go in and out. So the sanitary conditions were awful and it was freezing cold.” There were only one-room apartments, each of them housing several families at once. “The front door[s] had already been burnt during the first winter because there was no wood, and no fuel. So the corridor was open and the snow was blowing into the corridor and below the doors into the rooms. Sometimes we woke up and there was a pile of snow. It wouldn’t melt, that’s how cold it was back then.”

The Łódź Ghetto serves as a stark example of extreme social inequality and the collaboration of sections of the Jews with the Nazis in an effort to save their own lives and those of their loved ones. The ghetto was headed by Chaim Rumkowski, who, unlike many of his counterparts in other ghettos, was almost unanimously hated and despised by the ghetto population.

Rumkowski believed that making the ghetto labourers indispensable to the German war industry was the only way to save as many lives as possible. However, it is also a historical fact that he and many in his immediate circle personally profited from his compliance with the German authorities and the economic role the ghetto played for the Nazis. (Rumkowski is said to have boasted in one speech: “My motto is always to be at least 10 minutes ahead of every German demand.”) Although he complied with virtually all demands put forward by the Germans, Rumkowski was eventually deported to Auschwitz where he was murdered by former ghetto inhabitants.

The deplorable living conditions and the fascist crimes soon sparked opposition from political activists, workers, youth and intellectuals. Beginning in August 1940, protests of around 2,000 workers, as well as food riots took place, which were dispersed by the Germans as Rumkowski initially hesitated to employ the Jewish police against the protesters. While favouring a crackdown on the protests, the Nazis and the Judenrat subsequently introduced small measures to improve the situation for starving workers; self-relief organisations such as soup kitchens and collective vegetable gardens were now allowed. Another wave of strikes and protests erupted in early 1941.[3]

As in other ghettos, this resistance was spearheaded by various left workers’ organisations that had already played the key role in the labour movement of the city prior to the war. The Organizacja Antyfaszystowska—Lewica Związkowa (Antifascist Organisation—the United Left) was headed by actress Rachela Pacanowska-Krengel, better known as Zula Pacanowska, a member of the Polish Communist Party since 1925.

The organisation also included representatives from the Left Poalei

Tsyon, a socialist Zionist organisation, and the Jewish Labour Bund. According to one of the few survivors of the resistance movement, Michael Moshe Chechinski, himself a member of the Communist youth organisation, at the behest of Zula Pacanowska, they also collaborated with Trotskyists in the ghetto when organising strikes and protests.[4]

This ghetto resistance faced the most difficult conditions imaginable. First, apart from the fact that the ghetto inhabitants were virtually starving, the ghetto as a whole was cut off almost entirely from the outside world. Both due to its economic significance and the well-known traditions and strength of its labour movement, of all ghettos in Eastern Europe, the Łódź Ghetto was the most hermetically sealed off. Unlike in other ghettos, the smuggling of food and weapons from the “Aryan” side, which in Łódź was mostly inhabited by Germans, was almost impossible and very little information from the outside world reached the ghetto inhabitants. The Nazis also from the very beginning decreed that anyone trying to cross the ghetto wall would be shot immediately, a measure introduced in other ghettos only at a later stage of the war, when the liquidation of the ghettos, i.e., the total annihilation of their inhabitants in death camps, was impending.

Second, the working class movement in Poland, as in the rest of Europe, faced a severe political crisis when the war broke out. The emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the struggle of the Stalinists against the Left Opposition and the murder of the leaders of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Left Opposition in the USSR created an enormous amount of political confusion. In Poland, Stalin had the Communist Party dissolved in 1938, after almost all of its leadership and many of its most important members had been murdered. During the evolving genocide, the resistance organisation in the ghetto received no organised support from the Communist Party in the Soviet Union.[5]

Nevertheless, the socialists and communists held regular educational meetings, aimed not only at educating the ghetto prisoners, but also at lifting their spirits. They also organised numerous strikes and tried to mobilise the ghetto workers to sabotage the German war effort under the motto *Pracuj powoli* (PP, work slowly). Moreover, the organisation tried to fight for solidarity among the ghetto inhabitants, increasingly worn down by the slave labour, hunger and cold, and helped to provide those in need with additional food. In an interview with the USC Shoah Foundation, Michail Moshe Checinski stated that the resistance network spanned some 1,500 people. In an interview with the Shoah Foundation in 1995, another survivor of the Communist resistance, Roman Bojmelgrin, put the number at 2,000.

Jews from the Łódź Ghetto were among the first to be gassed in a systematic fashion during the Holocaust. Initially, most of them were deported to Chełmno, which started operating in late 1941 and was the first of the six death camps to gas masses of people. Later transports mostly went to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The first to be deported from the ghetto were those who could not work—children below age 10 and the sick and elderly. In the first nine months of 1942, some 90,000 people were deported to Chełmno, where they were almost all immediately gassed. The next major deportation followed in August 1944, briefly before the liquidation of the ghetto, when 65,000 people were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When Łódź was liberated by the Red Army in January 1945, the soldiers found only some 900 Jews who had stayed, either to do “cleaning work” or been in hiding. Overall, only an estimated 12,000 people out of the approximately 200,000 Jews from the Łódź Ghetto survived the Holocaust.

Apart from the approximately 200,000 Jews murdered in Chełmno and Auschwitz, over 40,000 ghetto inmates died while in the ghetto from starvation, torture, executions or the cold. In most cases, their bodies were dumped into mass graves in the Jewish cemetery of Łódź, which was also the site of several mass executions.

Even a superficial inquiry into the history of the Jewish community

among some of the city's inhabitants reveals how much of an open wound this question still is today. An elderly woman who is as old as the end of the war, 70 years, answers the question whether the fate of the Jewish population was known to the city's inhabitants after the war: "Yes, of course." Coming from a family that had lived in Łódź for well over a hundred years, she grew up in one of the houses from the former ghetto. Her sister, she goes on to say, married a man whose father and uncle had survived Auschwitz as the only ones from their family. However, although friendly, she abruptly breaks off the discussion after a few minutes and changes the subject, but not before she has drawn up a careful map showing the way from the hostel to the Jewish cemetery.

Another elderly lady is not so friendly when asked, five minutes away from the Jewish cemetery, whether she could help me find the way. "No", she says with an almost aggressive determination as if to emphasize her opposition to helping anyone who asks questions that include the term "Jewish". Fortunately, another woman is kind enough to show the way.

The cemetery is located on Bracka Street and surrounded by a massive wall on the side facing this street. It was constructed in 1892 and today contains more than 180,000 graves and 65,000 tombstones. The state of the cemetery is shocking. Sections of the cemetery wall are crumbling and most of the old tombstones are decaying. Some stones have been destroyed, either by human hands or the force of nature; others are overgrown with grass. Only the newest ones, for people who have died in the past 25 years, are covered with small stones, with which Jews traditionally pay their tribute to the dead when visiting their graves. More recently, memorial plaques for individual families have been put up on the inside of the cemetery wall; on the outside, larger groups of victims are commemorated. Outside the cemetery is also the only memorial in the city collectively honouring all those who died in the ghetto and in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Chełmno.

The graveyard is almost entirely empty. Only a few tourist groups from Israel, under special guard, are being led by their guide across the cemetery.

The poor state of this Jewish cemetery, the largest in Europe, testifies not only to the scale of the genocide, but also the fact that the many tens of thousands of people who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis in the interests of German imperialism have essentially remained unredeemed. There have been efforts to renovate the so-called Ghetto Fields (the graves of those who died in 1941-1944) by the local Jewish community, which today comprises only some 300 people. However, the funding comes almost exclusively from donations from three private individuals affected by the Holocaust and from the Israel Defence Forces.

There is not a single hint at any state support, least of all any support from the German state and the many German companies that benefitted from the slave labour in the Łódź Ghetto and then supported the murder of its inhabitants. Among those entrepreneurs was Josef Neckermann, part owner of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, who owned the Neckermann textile company and was responsible for providing the Wehrmacht with shoes and clothes. He was never tried, never paid a penny to his victims and received the Bundesverdienstkreuz, one of the highest merits awarded by the German government, in 1987.[6]

#### Notes:

1. An online tour through the former ghetto with historical explanations and photos has been made available at: <http://www.lodz-ghetto.com/>
2. Isaiah Trunk: *A History of the Lodz Ghetto*, introduction by Israel Gutman, Indiana University Press: 2008, p. xli.
3. Ibid, pp. liii-liv.
4. See Michael Moshe Checinski: *My Father's Watch*, Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing: 1994, p. 128.
5. In his memoirs, Checinski recalls that Zula Pacanowska had suggested to a local leader of the Communist underground that it establish relations with the Polish nationalist underground movement and asked for

logistical support. In a letter from Ignacy Loga-Sowinski in 1941, this proposal was rejected. See Checinski 1994, pp. 128-129.

6. For a German documentary on the career of Josef Neckermann, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbZbXdPFQFY>



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