Mendel Grosman - The Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) photograph collection at the Wiener Library, London

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Although historical exhibitions frequently incorporate photographic sources to illustrate a specific topic, they do not receive the same diligent source evaluation as it is good practice with text sources. Efforts are rarely undertaken to examine the origins of these images. The lack of source evaluated editions of relevant photographic material is a considerable impediment to the conscientious researcher, especially if it comes to the topic of the Nazi crimes.

Specialists in the field know about the photographs taken by Jewish photographers at the Łódź ghetto, primarily kept in Israel (Yad Vashem, Ghetto Fighters’ House) and the United States of America (Yivo Institute). Often these pictures can not be explicitly attributed to an individual photographer. In light of this, this paper endeavours to examine a smaller collection of 43 photographs from this ghetto, which can be found at the Wiener Library, London.

The State Archives in Łódź keeps 27 albums of the Jewish ghetto photographers each holding up to 1,000 contact prints of black and white 35-mm negatives (24 x 36

1 The research in the Wiener Library was made possible by a Gerald Feldman travel grant from Stiftung DGIA. Special thanks are due to Helgard Kramer for her kind support of the project. I would also like to thank the Deutsch-Polnische Akademische Gesellschaft e.V. and the Wiener Library for their help in translating this text into English.
5 http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/?location_id=23
These albums, however, do not allow a precise attribution of authorship to individual images, since the Jewish ghetto photographers did not sign their contact prints. The collection in London is important, because it allows an attribution of authorship.

All of the 43 prints in the Wiener Library are in a format typical for photo-postcards in German occupied Poland (1939-1945), 9 x 14 cm. On their back is an imprint with a blank field for a text message on the left half, and a field for the recipient’s address on the right. The photographic paper, which is typical for the era and location, and the photographer’s stamps on the back side indicate that the Jewish photographers processed the prints themselves. 32 of the 43 prints have been stamped with a particular photographer’s stamp on the back. 23 prints bear Mendel Grosman’s stamp on the back, showing his address in „Litzmannstadt“, Marynarska 55, flat no. 12. He used two different stamps while residing at that address. Nine prints are labelled with a stamp bearing the address „Foto-Kasprowy, Litzmannstadt, Inselstr. 22A“ on them. Most likely their author is Lajb Maliniak, to whom no pictures could be attributed so far.

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6 These albums document all departments of the Jewish council. The photographers provided the contact prints with handwritten information in German and Polish language. The albums do not comprise pictures of deportations and death inside the ghetto, which were taken inoficially by the Jewish photographers. I would like to thank Tanja Kinzel for this description of the visual sources. See illustrations in Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, op. cit., p. 6 and 35; Tanja KINZEL: Zwangsarbeit im Fokus. Drei fotografische Perspektiven aus dem Ghetto Litzmannstadt, in: Christoph Dieckmann, Babette Quinkert (eds.): Im Ghetto 1939-1945. Neuere Forschungen zu Alltag und Umfeld, Göttingen 2009, pp. 171-204, here p. 181, 184, 187.

He had been the proprietor of „Foto-Kasprowy“ in ul. Zawiszy⁸, which has been renamed to Inselstrasse by the Nazi occupants.

Mendel Grosman (or Grossman) was born on June 27th 1913 in Stachów⁹ and died in 1945. He was without doubt the best known Jewish photographer in the Łódź ghetto. There were, all together, around a dozen Jewish photographers working in the ghetto. We can identify (in addition to Grosman) the following individuals by name: Henryk Ross (1910-1991), Lajb (Lejb) Maliniak (16.9.1908 - ?), Mieczysław Borkowski und Hans Rubiczek.¹⁰ According to the ghetto chronicles from January 10th to 13th, 1942, a Jewish photographers co-operative, comprising eleven members and operating two photographic studios (ul. Brzezińska 11 and ul. Lutomierska 34), had been granted a concession.¹¹

Nachman Zonabend (Nahman Sonnabend) rescued most of the known prints made by Mendel Grosman, which had been printed.¹² Grosman passed on many of his prints to friends and acquaintances in order to increase their circulation and to hand them down to posterity.¹³ The Nazi occupation government excluded Jews from press photography/photo journalism, therefore the Jewish ghetto photographers had no chance to publish their images legally. Most photographic prints of the London collection bear the word „Hala“ in pencil on their back – a Polish nickname for Halina (Helena)¹⁴. This inscription provides a clue to the handing down of the holdings: the Wiener Library received the bundle of photographs in June 1976 from Helen Aronson, née Chmura. During the existence of the Łódź ghetto she worked as a cleaner in the office of Hans

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¹³ BEN-MENAHEM, op. cit., p. 106.
Biebow, the German head official of the ghetto administration. Mendel Grosman gave this collection of pictures to „Hala“ alias Halina Chmura, who survived the Holocaust and was able to immigrate to the United Kingdom.

The collection in London proves that Mendel Grosman tried to distribute not only his own photographs, but those of at least one of the other Jewish ghetto photographers. The pictures show various workshops („Arbeits-Ressorts“\(^{15}\)) established by the Jewish council („Judenrat“) in the Łódź ghetto, which was put up in spring 1940 by the German occupying forces in Poland. In the course of time it was transformed from the largest detention camp for Polish Jews into a gigantic forced labour camp for Jews from various countries. From the end of 1940 onwards, the textile manufacturers played a crucial role in the war effort, providing the German Wehrmacht with garments.\(^{16}\) The second thematical focal point of the photographs is health care for those interned in the ghetto\(^{17}\): chemists, hospitals, dentists, and especially health care for infants and children.

In early 1942, the Nazi regime began to deport those held in the Łódź ghetto to the extermination camp in Kulmhof (Chełmno) on the Ner. The last Jews, deemed too infirm for hard labour, children, the sick and the elderly, were deported in September 1942 and duly murdered. In light of this information, one can conclude that the discussed photographs must have been taken in a time frame from late 1940 to September 1942.

Examining these images today as objective representations of the past perceives photographs taken during the Nazi era without critically analysing the circumstances under which the pictures were taken. This can lead to the mistaken notion, such photographs would trivialise the Holocaust. This is especially true of the pictures

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\(^{14}\) I would like to thank Ewa Czerwiakowski for this information.

\(^{15}\) A list of all workshops („Arbeits-Ressorts“) and their location is given in: Artur EISENBACH (ed.), Dokumenty i Materialy do Dziejów Okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce, Vol. 3: Getto Łódzkie, Warszawa 1946.


\(^{17}\) See BARANOWSKI, op. cit., pp. 115-128, here p. 123f.
showing health care in the ghetto. They might suggest that the Jewish ghetto inmates were provided with sufficient medical treatment, which was anything but the case. To evaluate the visual source, one has to ask not only about the content, but also about the author, the conditions in which these pictures were taken, about their purpose and the intended recipient of these photographs. These pictures were taken by a Jewish photographer (interned) in the ghetto and have been passed on to others interned therein. They served as an informal internal communication among ghetto inmates. They probably represent – like the fruit trees planted by people held in the Łódź ghetto18 – their hope of eventually surviving despite being forced to endure systematic starvation and slave labour organised by the German ghetto administrators.19 Those subjected to the genocidal machinations of the Nazi regime strived not only in this instance as much as possible to counter the visual slander of Nazi propaganda to the best of their abilities realising images of themselves as dignified human beings.20

The Wiener Library digitized these photographs and supplemented them with an interview with Helen Aronson conducted in 2009.

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List of photographs giving stamps and other notations on their back:

WL 5899 – no stamp – „Hala“

Workshops („Arbeits-Ressorts“)

WL 7387 – Foto-Kasprowy – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7415 – Foto-Kasprowy – „Hala“

WL 7404 – Foto-Kasprowy
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

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Deutsch-Polnische Akademische Gesellschaft e.V.
www.dp-ag.org
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Jewish Ghetto Police („Ordnungsdienst“)

WL 7421 – Foto-Kasprowy – „Hala“
Offices

WL 7412 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7398 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7574 – Grosman – „Hala“

WL 7401 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7414 – Grosman – „Hala“

Shoemakers

WL 7399 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7402 – Grosman – „Hala“

WL 7595 – Grosman – „Hala“
Textile workshops

WL 7403 – Grosman – „Hala“

WL 7575 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7413 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7405 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7400 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7392 – Foto-Kasprowy – „Hala“
Pharmacies

WL 7388 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7390 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

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WL 7389 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7391 – no stamp – „Hala“
Newborn nurseries and paediatric units

WL 7397 – FOTO Grosman – „Hala“

WL 1749 – no stamp – „Hala“
WL 5980 – FOTO Grosman – „Hala“

WL 5978 – FOTO Grosman
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 1759 – FOTO Grosman

WL 7407 – Foto-Kasprowy
WL 1760 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7417 – Foto-Kasprowy – „Hala“
Dental Treatment

WL 5979 – Grosman – „Hala“

WL 7409 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7411 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7410 – Grosman – „Hala“
Hospitals

WL 7416 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7420 – Grosman – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7506 – no stamp – „Hala“

WL 7418 – no stamp – „Hala“
Primary sources concerning the authorship of photographs from the Łódź ghetto (1940-1944) in the Wiener Library, London

WL 7419 – Grosman – „Hala“

WL 7408 – FOTO Grosman – „Hala“