

A Lens On Resistance

‘The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross,’ at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

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Damaged but saved: Ghetto residents being deported,

Resistance comes in many forms. Confined to the Nazi-run ghetto in Lodz, Poland, from 1940 to 1945, the Polish Jewish photojournalist Henryk Ross (1910-1991) wielded not a gun but a camera, shooting an estimated 6,000 photos of life and death amid the squalor and starvation he witnessed all around him. About 200 images from his Holocaust chronicle will be on view in exhibit “Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross,” opening Feb. 25 at the Museum of Jewish Heritage (MJH) and on view through June 24.

Some of the most searing images depict children. A young boy lies on the sidewalk, his hand grasping at a door to hold him up; the caption reads, “Falling in the street from hunger.” A group of children huddle in a horse-drawn wooden cart carrying them away from the viewer—to a deportation

to the death camp. Here are rag-clad children wearing yellow stars pulling carts, scavenging for food in the gutter, clawing at a barbed wire fence closing them off from the adults glimpsed on the other side — perhaps their parents, perhaps glimpsed for the last time, before being transported to the death camps of Chelmno or Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Once seen, these photos are not easily forgotten. But, says Michael S. Glickman, the museum's president and CEO, "that is part of our responsibility" as a Holocaust museum. Ross' photographs are his visual testimony of the Shoah, Glickman continues, providing striking images of "the suffering, the violence, the shrinking of life, the pain of being separated from family members and the insistence on maintaining whatever 'normal' life they could." Such moments of joy, calm, loving embraces, even children's birthday celebrations provide a stark contrast to the darker mood that predominates.

At any given time, about 200,00 Jews and members of other groups branded by the Nazis as "undesirable" would be jammed within the ghetto's meager 1.6 square mile area. When the Soviet Army liberated the Lodz Ghetto in January 1945, only 877 Jews remained. Ross was one of them.



A young boy and girl.

Throughout the galleries, voices of Lodz Ghetto survivors bearing witness to their experiences can also be heard, their testimony making Ross' images even more vivid, more shiver-inducing. In addition, the exhibit displays numerous artifacts from the ghetto, including an edict that forbade owning or using cameras at the risk of severe punishment.

Ross was in a position that allowed him access to a camera and film, though the risks he ran were no less harsh. A professional photographer before the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, he was, upon being sent to the ghetto in 1940, given a job as staff photographer by the Jewish Administration's Statistics Department. He was to create identification photos for the residents and to document, for propaganda purposes, the supposedly model working conditions at the approximately 100 factories and

workshops where ghetto residents were forced to labor for inhumanly long hours to produce leather goods, shoes, textiles, clothing and other supplies for the German people.

One such series of staged photos begins with two meticulously dressed women hovering over a fabric-filled table as they work on elaborately embroidered flower designs, samples of which hang on display above them. Next, a serious-minded woman oversees children seated at looms as they dutifully learn to weave. In a third, this same woman guides a classroom of young girls plying their knitting needles and yarn. Although a quick glance may signal nothing amiss, a closer glance reveals a darker story. The adults and children all wear several layers of clothing, suggesting there is no heat; the rooms are bare, no windows visible, and only a single light bulb dangles in the weaving room and the predominant facial expressions range from grim determination to forlorn heartbreak.



Ross photographing for identification cards. Photos courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift from Archive of Modern Conflict, 2007. ©2015 Art Gallery of Ontario

The bleak realities are explicitly documented in the many clandestine photos Ross took with film he had managed to stockpile by cleverly minimizing the amount used for the official photography. To avoid discovery by German guards of what he was actually photographing, he would hide his camera under his overcoat or hide himself behind a wall while focusing his lens through an opening between wooden slats.

In the fall of 1944, with the ghetto nearly emptied by Nazi death camp deportations, Ross packed his film rolls in a metal box and buried them in the ground, to preserve, he wrote, “some record of our tragedy ... I was anticipating the total destruction of Polish Jewry. I wanted to leave a historical record of our martyrdom.”



Ross inspecting negatives.

When, in March 1945, after the liberation of Lodz, he returned to rescue the negatives, he discovered that many had deteriorated or been damaged in the frozen ground. He salvaged approximately 4,000.

As for Ross himself, in the 1950s he moved to Tel Aviv, where he worked for a lithographic printing business. In 1961, he testified at the trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and his photographs were used as evidence. Although Ross returned several times through the years to the 17-page folio of his negatives that can be seen in large reproductions in the exhibit, he apparently never completed editing it to his satisfaction, and published only one collection of his photos, “The

Last Journey of the Jews of Lodz.” Through his astonishing bravery in chronicling their travails, he has kept their memory alive.

“Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross” opens Feb. 25 and runs through June at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.