

The Emperor of Lies by Steve Sem-Sandberg.
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Among the many tortures that the Nazis inflicted on Jews as they rampaged across central and eastern Europe was to corral them in ghettos in appalling conditions; yet even that was not enough so they ratcheted up the torture to an even higher degree by appointing Councils of Elders, the Judenräte, who had to administer the ghettos on behalf of the Nazis. The heads of the Judenräte had, among other things, the ultimate responsibility to choose who was deported, even when it was known that deportation meant death by one means or another.

Some of these unfortunate men tried their hardest to save those in their power for as long as possible, others let the power go to their heads and behaved, at times, in ways almost as evil as their masters.

No ghetto leader emerges from the war with as much opprobrium as Chaim Rumkowski, leader of the Lodz ghetto, and it is this period of his life with which *The Emperor of Lies* is concerned. It is a huge novel, of some 641 pages, with an Afterword with historical information that relates to the story.

The characters, be they Jews or Nazis, men or women, adults or children, are portrayed in such a way that the reader is enabled to be both an observer of events and a part of them. This almost documentary style of writing is immensely effective and softens the horror for the reader, albeit only a little.

Rumkowski emerges from *Emperor of Lies* as a deeply flawed man who, while on one level following a plan that if the Jews of the ghetto worked for the Germans they might be preserved alive, on another level created a personal fiefdom designed to serve his own ends. Ultimately, all his endeavours are for nothing, for the ghetto is liquidated and Rumkowski himself transported to Auschwitz and murdered there with his entire family in August 1944.

The Emperor of Lies brings to life the degradation of the Lodz ghetto and the dehumanising effect it had on the victims of Nazism, innocents and collaborators alike. This is the first great Holocaust novel of the 21st century.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh