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Sem-Sandberg, Steve. The Emperor of Lies

In 1940, the second largest Jewish ghetto in Poland was established in the town of Lodz. Placed in control of this ghetto by the Nazi regime was a figure still controversial and compelling today, Mordechai Rumkowski. A failed businessman, a bullying insurance agent, Rumkowski was by all accounts brash, egomaniacal, and deeply insecure. But he could also be oddly generous and loving, fancying himself a savior to the weak and the innocent. After his wife?s death in 1936, he established a Kinderkolonie, an orphanage for Jewish children. He encouraged the orphans to look on him as a father figure, going so far as to sprinkle candy in their midst on his visits, ensuring they would always run up to and after him.

And, just as he tried to protect the orphans under his care, he attempted to protect the Jewish inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto. He knew, or believed he knew, that if he could only demonstrate to the Nazis the usefulness of the Jews, they would be spared the camps. And so he turned the entire ghetto into a massive industrial complex, forcing the inhabitants to work long hours under brutal conditions, producing furniture and clothing for German citizens and camoflage, foorwear, jackets, and buckles for the Wehrmacht.

And so the central question in Sem-Sandberg?s novel is this: Was Rumkowski a collaborator or a liberator? A sinner, or a saint? A good man who made a difficult choice, or an evil man exploiting his position for personal gain?

The novel opens 2 years into the life of the ghetto, when Rumkowski is forced to annouce that 20,000 inhabitants will be deported from th ghetto, sent to the camps. It goes backwards and forwards in time from there, exploring both Rumkowski?s past and personal life as well as the lives and daily torments of the inhabitants of the ghetto. While Rumkowski is the central figure, the author?s scope is much wider, utilizing an immersive richness of detail and a large, almost Dickensian cast to illuminate this place and this time in a three-dimensional fashion seldom attempted in fiction. Sem-Sandberg?s use of archival materials in reconstructing ghetto life lends his novel historical accuracy and a certain legitimacy, while the fiction format allows the reader to empathize and understand the plight of those within ghetto walls in a way non-fiction seldom does. A challenging, difficult, and ultimately illuminating work.

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