# Berman Lejb

**Categories: Biographies**

Yiddish-language poet and journalist, was born on 7 July 1886 in Karlin, near Pinsk, in what is now Belarus. After serving in the Russian army from 1909 to 1912, Berman was released into the reserves. During the First World War, he lived in Minsk; in 1919, he moved to Łódź, where he lived at 109 Piotrkowska. His many activities in Łódź included giving calligraphy lessons. He eventually took on the name Graf Kali, which is an anagram of the word “calligrapher”. He was a contributor to newspapers in Łódź, including Lodzer Morgenblat and Lodzer Folksblat. A volume of his poems "Gelechter fun trenen. A zamlung fun humoristisch-satyrysze lider" (Laughter Through Tears. A collection of humour-satirical songs) was published in 1920 and in 1935, "Gezamelte lider" (Collected poems). Beginning in 1931, he was a regular contributor to the newspaper Lodzer Togblat, for which he wrote humorous columns, and also published children's drawings and rhymes, short stories and lyrical poems. Beginning in 1930, he also did work for the Warsaw-based Yiddish newspaper "Haynt" and in all the humorous periodicals in Warsaw and Łódź, including "Di Knejdlech". As well, he put out Christmas publications with poems dedicated to people who paid for the verse or for an ad. He also put out several one-day newspapers: "Der dozor", concerning the elections in the Jewish Community in Łódź and pushing for list No. 8; "Grins" for the Shavuot; "Lodżer pejsech blat" in observance of Passover; "Szłach mones" for Purim, "Der szojfer" for Rosh Hashanah; "Di suke" for Sukkot. These publications were very popular in the Jewish community. In 1936, in the "Akdumos", a special one-day newspaper, he published a dozen poems advertising Łódź's Jewish factory owners. In poems, he touched on the personalities of the entrepreneurs, merchants and something about their companies, urging people to take advantage of their products and services. He also emphasised their “Jewishness” from a variety of perspectives – in the religion, charity, support for community organizations, among other activities.

In the ghetto, he collaborated with the Geto-Cajtung, the one

newspaper briefly published there,  which was more of a propaganda sheet for Rumkowski. In it, he wrote a variety of texts praising Rumkowski and other ghetto officials. The main theme of Berman's poems is Rumkowski’s achievements. With his texts, he supported Rumkowski’s one-man rule and his vision for the ghetto. Not only did he praise Rumkowski's “mind and talent”, but he also believed that the ghetto leader  with “his wit and talent, the Creator endowed him with a strong, powerful hand"[1] , which guaranteed the exemplary work of the ministries and punishment for the lazy. In this black-and-white vision of the ghetto, Rumkowski depicted evil elements in the form of lazy people on the one hand, and decent, diligent people on the other. “The silver-white head” of Rumkowski in the white carriage gave him an almost sacral dimension, as the texts put it. A strict yet caring father and guardian of the ghetto, Rumkowski cared for children and the sick, the texts asserted. Berman did not mention a word about privileged clerks, for whom special shops were created where they could purchase products rarely seen in the ghetto, such as milk or butter.

Berman's poems lack the slightest trace of any criticism of Rumkowski. The Nazi oppressors are not mentioned; the frequent use of such verbs and phrases as “to work”, “to call for work”, “to sow”, “to cultivate”, “to employ”, “to give work” gives the impression that we are dealing with a state under construction rather than human misery confined to a ghetto prison under totalitarian rule. Berman's ghetto poems, characterised by a purely propagandistic function, involve  unsophisticated rhymes and lack tropes typical of good poetry and ironic distance.

Berman also wrote similar texts in honour of Gestapo agent David Gertler (vide), head of the Special Branch, who was popular among ghetto inhabitants. The poet compared Gertler to a “shining star, permeating all places” and his character to a “diamond”[2]. In his poetry, Berman also praised, among others, the “Minister of Provisions” Avigdor Mendel Szczęśliwy (vide) and Sigmund Rajngold (vide).

Before the war, Berman lived at 109 Piotrkowska. In the ghetto, he lived at 10 Marynarska with his wife Ruchla (born 1891), and children Sara (born 1916), Dawid (born 1925), Jakub (born 1929) and Artur (1933–1942). His youngest son was deported during the Szpera (vide).

In August 1944, Berman was deported to Auschwitz, where he apparently was murdered.

Krystyna Radziszewska

## Footnotes

1. „Geto-Cajtung”, 7.03.1941, s. 3.

2. AŻIH, 226/23, L. Berman, „Dawid Gertler”, k. 1.

## Resources

AŻIH, 226/23, L. Berman, „Dawid Gertler”, k. 1;

„Geto-Cajtung”, 7.03.1941, s. 3;

Sztetl, szund, bunt i Palestyna. Antologia twórczości literackiej Żydów w Łodzi, red. K. Radziszewska, D. Dekiert, E. Wiatr, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2017, s. 69, s. 134; K. Radziszewska, Berman Lejb, [w:] Słownik kultury literackiej Łodzi do 1939 r., red. K. Badowska i in., Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2022, s. 47–48; ŻDŁ t. 4, s. 22-23.

## Tags

Jewish administration writing in the ghetto

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