

The Warsaw Ghetto

Review Number:

398

Publish date:

Wednesday, 31 March, 2004

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ISBN:

30009546

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

320pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Editor:

Michal Grynberg

ISBN:

1186207660

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£20.00

Pages:

504pp.

Publisher:

Granta

Place of Publication:

London

Author:

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ISBN:

300097425X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£8.95

Pages:

145pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Tim Cole

In the popular imagination, the geographical complexity of the Holocaust has been reduced to two Polish towns, Oswiecim and Warsaw. The death camp sited in the former has emerged as not only the definitive death camp and representative of the state-sponsored factory-like mass killings of the Holocaust, but also as a synonym for evil. In contrast, the latter has emerged as both the definitive ghetto and site of heroic resistance, which in Israeli narratives of the Holocaust in particular, offers a degree of redemption from this terrible past. However, as the three books under review suggest, the historical complexity of Jewish experiences of the Warsaw ghetto is not easily reducible to resistance alone. In Paulsson's ground-breaking study *Secret City*, it is evasion rather than resistance that takes centre-stage. In Janusz Korczak's *Ghetto Diary* – published in paperback for the first time – the reflections of the paediatrician are on his own personal past and future, as well as the present day-to-day concerns of running an orphanage relocated into the ghetto. In Michal Grynberg's edited collection of diary and memoir accounts, newly translated into English by Philip Boehm, the breadth of Jewish experiences, ranging from collaboration through resistance, are revealed. Taken together, the three books uncover something of the variety of Jewish experiences of living in Nazi occupied Warsaw, over the course of six years of changing Nazi actions and Jewish responses.

The rapidly shifting chronology of the wartime years forms the rough framework for Paulsson's carefully-researched study, which examines Jewish responses to the setting up of the Warsaw ghetto in 1940, the commencement of mass deportations in 1942, the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943 and the city-wide Warsaw uprising in 1944. Whilst the main story in Warsaw during this period is one of mass destruction – 98 per cent of the city's Jewish population and 25 per cent of the city's non-Jewish Polish population were killed during World War Two – Paulsson's important contribution is to draw our attention to a less well-known story, that of Jewish concealment on the Aryan side. Although the numbers in hiding were relatively small in comparison to those deported from the city to the death camp at Treblinka, Paulsson's estimate of 28,000 Warsaw Jews in hiding at one point or another during the war represents a sizeable minority. Certainly the numbers who decided to escape to the Aryan side (in particular in 1942 and 1943) were far greater than those who chose the route of armed uprising in April 1943, and Paulsson suggests that there was a relatively high success rate. Of the 28,000 Jews who went into hiding, he estimates that some 11,500 survived the war, leading Paulsson to conclude that, 'of all the options that seemed to be available to the Jews, including armed resistance, flight unquestionably offered in practice the best chance of survival, and, contrary to the prevailing belief, it did take place on a massive scale'.(p. 13)

The significance of Paulsson's book is not simply that it is the first full-length study of the nature and extent of Jewish hiding on the Aryan side in wartime Warsaw, but also that it offers a model of studying the relatively neglected topic of evasion during the Holocaust. Drawing on diary and memoir accounts, Paulsson points to the use of pre-existing networks with non-Jewish friends and colleagues, as well as the multitude of ways across the porous ghetto wall. Escapes took place over, under and through the wall itself, as well as through the ghetto gates, which could be breached in vehicles, with passes and through a combination of bribing and distracting the guards. Not only were Jewish and Polish policemen stationed there open to bribery, but so were a number of (ordinary) German gendarmes. Once outside the ghetto, Jews were vulnerable to blackmail and extortion, but they were also helped by a network of Poles, a factor that questions monolithic accounts of pre-war Polish antisemitism. The scale not only of the dangers facing Jews living in hiding, but also the help offered to Jews can be seen in Paulsson's conclusion, drawn from a reading of the longer memoirs, that the average Warsaw Jew hid in over seven different hiding places on the Aryan side. Whilst the 28,000 Jews in hiding faced the threat of some 3000-4000 extortionists and blackmailers, Paulsson estimates that they received help from 70,000-90,000 Poles (one twelfth of the city's population). All of these individuals made up what Paulsson claims amounted to a 'secret city' within occupied Warsaw.

As the numerical estimates referred to above suggest, Paulsson attempts not simply a qualitative, but also a quantitative, study of this secret city. It is the quantitative analysis, which, for Paulsson, 'is the backbone of this study, or rather the skeleton, which though cold and hard and lifeless nonetheless serves to set the proportions' (p. 19). In a few places, numerical statistics appear a little overly-derived and not absolutely necessary. For example, Paulsson's attempts to assess the size of pre-war secondary networks includes too much conjecture. The use of a quantitative approach here seems rather unnecessary, given the rich qualitative evidence offered through the case study of the networks utilized when Janina Lewinson (Bauman) went into hiding.

Elsewhere, however, Paulsson's emphasis upon quantifying evasion is much more firmly grounded and convincing. In part he draws upon lists of the several thousand Jews in hiding who received aid from a number of Jewish organisations, as well as lists of Polish Jewish survivors. But he also draws upon diary and memoir accounts as the basis for quantitative analysis, extrapolating from the numerical data found in these. His estimations of the numbers hiding and surviving are drawn from both quantitative and qualitative sources, and point to the usefulness of asking quantitative questions of memoir accounts when other, partial, numerical data survives.

In general, Paulsson's use of survivor testimony and memoirs shows careful awareness of these equally valuable and problematic sources. He is conscious of the tendency in memoir literature for the extraordinary, rather than the ordinary, to warrant reference, with (for example) survivors remembering only the extremes of altruistic or dishonest landlords. His decision to pay particular attention to references to third persons, 'so as not to bias the sample in favour of survivors' (p. 20), makes good sense. However, Paulsson's decision to draw examples from memoir and testimonial accounts 'without worrying too much about whether they are representative', on the grounds that the statistical framework to the study provides 'the proper proportions' (p. 19) is problematic. Whilst the statistical framework to the study is immensely helpful, I would be much more cautious about then doing away with the generally accepted practice of working with qualitative sources in a way which gives fair account to how representative they are. The danger of Paulsson's approach is that he offers what he admits to be exceptional escapes (for example those which were entirely spontaneous or involved encounters with decent German gendarmes), and asks on the back of these 'whether many lives might not have been saved if more people had been prepared to "give it a go"' (p. 92), rather than being overly concerned with the prerequisites of money, contacts on the Aryan side and 'Aryan looks' which dominate many of the ghetto narratives.

Although, as Paulsson demonstrates, a large minority did 'give it a go' and go into hiding, particularly in 1942-43, the majority did not, and his account could pay more attention to why this was not the case. Certainly those reasons are more complex than Paulsson's conclusion that, in the closing days of the ghetto,

'the belief that escape was nearly impossible was in many cases a bigger obstacle than any reality to which it may have corresponded'.(p. 84) German policing of escapes deserves more consideration, as does the gendering of evasion. Although Paulsson does mention male escapees' concerns about circumcision, this important theme remains underdeveloped. Was the marking of Jewish males critical in explaining why the Polish peasant Antopolski 'was able to rescue a number of Jewish children, especially girls' (p. 89) and why Marek Adelman chose Blady-Szwajger with her 'good looks' (p. 90) to work for the Bund on the Aryan side? Was the reason why close to 60 per cent of those in hiding were women because most escapes took place after the first deportations had occurred in which a majority of women were deported, or because women were less able to find opportunities to work in the ghetto, or was it because of perceptions of male vulnerability as a result of circumcision? Gender, along with the intersections of age, class and ideological commitments, warrants much fuller consideration in histories of Holocaust evasion.

But, as the example of Janusz Korczak shows, the reasons for choosing not to escape to the Aryan side were personal as well as social. Reading his *Ghetto Diary* has some parallels with reading Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, in that our knowledge of the end of the story shapes our reading of these diarists' words. In the case of Korczak, we read his words written in the early summer of 1942 in the light of Adolf Berman's description of the deportation of the orphanage that he ran at the beginning of August 1942. In a few terse sentences, Berman records – words reproduced in *Words to Outlive Us* –

one of the first orphanages to be evacuated was Dr Korczak's Orphans' Home. The entire staff – with Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczynska in the lead, allowed themselves to be deported with the children, despite the fact that the directors were offered their freedom even at Umschlagplatz itself'.(pp. 117-18)

It is this act, which has been taken as both heroic and an act of supreme sacrifice, which has led to Korczak's name being attached to everything from streets and schools to an entire year and an asteroid.

Korczak was a remarkable man. A paediatrician and writer, he established the first progressive orphanage in Warsaw, complete with its own parliament, court of peers and newspaper. Something of his wit and creativity comes across in a diary that ranges widely from fragmented memories of his personal past to his dreams for the future. The wartime events are somewhat peripheral, although Korczak does mention the monotony and macabre absurdity of ghetto life, as well as the thankless task of securing the necessary money and food to keep the orphanage going. In the midst of this all, his wit remained, with occasional examples of gallows humour:

An amusing reminiscence:

Five decagrams of so-called smoked sausage now costs 1 zloty 20. It used to cost only 80 grosze (and bread a bit more).

I said to a saleswoman:

'Tell me, dear lady, isn't that sausage by chance made from human flesh? It's rather too cheap for horsemeat.'

And she replied:

'How should I know. I wasn't there when it was being made.'

No sign of annoyance, no friendly smile for a witty customer, no shrug to denounce the joke as nightmarish, macabre. Nothing. She merely stopped slicing, waiting for me to make up my mind. A sorry customer, a sorry joke or implication, not worth talking about.(p. 44)

Reading the diary, it seems that this is the place where Korczak came to escape from the present realities of ghetto life rather than faithfully to record those realities. Although historians reading Korczak's diary might find frustration at the lack of answers to the kinds of questions about ghetto life that they are asking, it is a

source that points to the heightened role that writing played within the ghetto. That writing could be a means of escapism, catharsis, survival or even an act of resistance can be clearly seen in a number of the 29 diaries and testimonies from the Warsaw Jewish Historical Institute, which are thematically and chronologically edited together by Michal Grynberg. These accounts are fascinating, not simply for what their authors tell us about their experience of ghetto life, the Jewish council and Jewish police, deportations, escape, hiding and liberation, but also when they reflect upon the act of writing itself.

For some, writing was a means not only to occupy their own time, but also to occupy the time of those with whom they were hiding. David Fogelman, who complained, 'the worst thing is we have nothing to do', wrote a poem about life in the shelter: 'my companions were delighted by it, so the next day I went on writing'.(p. 416) Writing for an audience of fellow-escapees can also be seen in two copies of the satirical 'Bunker Weekly' from November 1944, written by Helena Midler. In a newspaper characterized by a hefty dose of black humour, Midler offered 'Young Housewives' advice on how to respond to 'our citizens' growing tendency to put on weight' in the form of a weekly meal planner:

Monday - 2 wheat pancakes with coffee; barley soup
Tuesday - barley soup; 2 wheat pancakes with coffee
Wednesday - 2 wheat pancakes with coffee; barley soup
Thursday - barley soup; 2 wheat pancakes with coffee
Friday - 2 wheat pancakes with coffee; barley soup
Saturday - barley soup; 2 wheat pancakes with coffee
Sunday - 2 wheat pancakes with coffee; barley soup.(p. 387)

But authors self-consciously wrote not only for themselves or those hiding with them, but also for posterity. In the Jewish policeman Calel Perechodnick's remarkable memoir – the only extract from Grynberg's collection already published in English – he sees what he writes to be a second child 'born in the pain of death' who will survive when his first child and wife did not.(p. 374) For Stefan Ernest, the fragility of his own life in hiding contrasted with his own hopes that his words might survive:

I am hiding in a pit, lingering on without fresh air, without steady nourishment, without sufficient plumbing, without any prospect of change, and every passing hour is worth its weight in gold. I can feel my strength fading away, feel myself suffocating for want of air. The struggle for my personal survival is becoming hopeless. Here, on this side of the wall – but that doesn't matter, because I will finish my account, and I have faith that in the proper time it will see the light of day and people will know how it was. And they will ask if this is the truth. I will answer in advance: No, this is not the truth, it is only a small part, a tiny fraction of the truth. The essential truth, the real truth, cannot be described even with the most powerful pen.(p. 334)

Ernest's self-conscious dilemma over telling the truth about this past, whilst also being well aware of his inability to adequately do just that, is one that a number of survivors have reflected on. How to tell the truth about this particular past and just what that truth is, are questions that have been asked with particular poignancy and urgency in the case of the Holocaust. Reading Paulsson's study, it is clear that the statistical truth of the Holocaust is a matter of some concern. In the course of discussing the Warsaw ghetto, Paulsson estimates a population density of around three persons per room in the Warsaw ghetto, under half that normally cited in the literature (including by Boehm in his introduction to *Words to Outlive Us*) of over seven persons per room. This more generally cited yet inflated figure is evidence of a wider problem that Paulsson terms 'the martyrological tendency that exists in the Holocaust literature and the distortions and blindspots to which it gives rise.(p. 117) Yet, for Paulsson, 'the reality of the Warsaw ghetto was awful enough; there is no need to exaggerate'.(ibid.) His book is a passionate call for historical engagement with the surviving traces – whether they are quantitative or qualitative sources – to capture something of that

reality.

Yet some would question whether historians are the best people to uncover the realities of life in the ghetto. I am reminded of the American journalist D D Guttenplan, who bemoaned the decision not to bring Holocaust survivors to the witness box in the Lipstadt-Irving trial, but instead to rely upon the expert evidence of historians. He was quick to admit that,

Witnesses are always partial. Memory is by definition selective. And testimony – not the sworn responses of expert witnesses, but the still-vivid responses of people whose history is lived, not studied – can be treacherous. Yet without witnesses, without human voices to put flesh on the facts, we have something that, while it may pass muster as history, can never tell the truth.[\(1\)](#)

Guttenplan's words echo popular sentiments that afford survivors a greater authority than historians in getting to the truth about this particular past. Something of that preference can be seen in Philip Boehm's introduction to *Words to Outlive Us*, when he suggests that 'beyond their value as factual sources, the documents confront the reader with personal and emotional realities often lost in scholarly presentations'. (p. 12) In short, the voices of those who survived, and those who did not, are seen to have an emotional truth about them.

There certainly is an emotional power to many of the accounts collected together by Grynberg. Stefania Staszewska's account of surviving the selection at the Umschlagplatz but being separated from her mother who is deported, is harrowing, as is Natan Zelichower's description of discovering that his wife and daughter have been taken away. He is handed a note, which had been hastily written by his daughter: 'Dear Papa! Save yourself! It looks like we are lost. I will do what I can to keep up Mother's spirits; maybe fate will bring us back together. Your Stella'. (p. 238) Something of the dilemmas facing Jews in hiding is captured in Franciszka Grünberg's tense description of the days when her family tried to decide whether to leave hiding for the Hotel Polski, from where it was claimed that Jews would be allowed to emigrate (claims that proved, as Paulsson shows, unfounded). And in the remarkable diary written by Helena Midler, who penned the satirical 'Bunker Weekly', the tensions and monotony of hiding in a bunker in late 1944, willing the war to end are brilliantly captured. Midler is one of those estimated 28,000 who evaded deportation from Warsaw, although she was not one of those estimated 11,500 who survived until liberation. Knowing this makes her words all the more poignant:

Since we refuse to delude ourselves with hope, there's nothing else to do except lie wrapped up under our bedding in the morning and listen to the noise of the fighting that is sowing destruction and death all around, while (oh, paradox!) bringing us – who knows – maybe life?. (p. 379)

Notes

1. D. D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial. History, Justice and the David Irving Libel Case* (London: Granta Books, 2001), pp. 307-308. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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