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Part One

STILL CIRCLING:
CONVERSATIONS
WITH SOLDIERS
OF THE JEWISH
FIGHTING
ORGANIZATION

Recording the Holocaust

This book was created from the memories of people who are no longer.

I originally took my “circling” around the history of the Warsaw ghetto uprising into the public domain almost forty years ago. My first conversation with Marek Edelman—which is also the first in this book—was conducted in 1985 for the Polish underground periodical *Czas*. Before long, that conversation had been translated into several languages, and it rapidly became important, for in those days (too), the world was deeply divided, and in America or France, Marek Edelman’s words from Poland sounded like a message from another world. In 1988 and 1989, I spoke with Warsaw ghetto insurrectionists living in Israel; in 1990, with Inka—Adina Blady-Szwajgier—in Warsaw.

The first edition of these conversations with soldiers from the Warsaw ghetto came out in 1991, thanks to Hanna Krall, who said: “This needs publishing” and called a publisher. “You need to talk to Stasia,” Marek said to me in 1999. I was a few weeks too late. I listened to Chajka Belchatowska too late, too; she was already very sick by then. In 1999, I managed to persuade Kazik Ratajzer that his story should be added to what was by then *Ciągle po kole* [Still Circling]. In 2000, I closed that circle around the uprising with a second conversation with Marek Edelman.

All of my interlocutors were talking to me years after the events. Some of them for the first time. Many of them for the first time using Polish words. Masza, Luba, Aron, Pnina, Kazik, and Szmuel had all managed to “assimilate” the Holocaust in Hebrew in one way or another. In any case, a different narrative was expected of them over there. Their conversations with me were more about unlocking their memories than naming events. The Polish words cleaved more nearly to the past than Hebrew ones; they were closer to the quick and made more painful meanings. My conversations with Inka and Marek were automatically filtered through our Polish experience. (In our communication, the Poland that was so irksome in both space and word had been present throughout the intervening years.) The language triggered nothing; it was an invisible tool wielded by the meanings that surfaced.

They remembered differently, for each of them was speaking about their own experience, stored in their own memory. (Their stories are not chapters in a history textbook. Their stories are the sort of material that is flattened by textbook history.) They used many words for the same meanings because their memory had registered itself in many languages—Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew. Marek always said “Jurek Wilner,” because Jurek was from Warsaw, but Szmulik Ron called Wilner by his Hebrew name, “Arie,” because they were both Zionists. They all pronounced Rozowski’s first name in different ways, because some of them preserved the “dark l” from Yiddish and called him “Welwł,” while others Polonized it, as Welwel. Their own names have been recorded in a variety of ways as well: using German spelling, or a transliteration from the Hebrew, or a Polonized version. There are a lot of proper names here because they used so many. The mass deportation of residents of the Warsaw ghetto in July, August, and September 1942 is variously the “campaign” (Ger. “*Aktion*,” Pol. “*akcja*,” lit. “action”), the “deportation,” the “*große Aktion*,” the “deportation campaign.” But the same words mean different things in different places: “the deportation campaign” might elsewhere refer to the final liquidation of a ghetto in another city. “The campaign” was also the term used by Masza and Pnina for the uprising in the ghetto because they were translating the German word “*Aktion*,” and Anielewicz spoke of “self-defense.” The word “uprising” came from another, later world.

Over thirty years have passed since the first edition of these conversations with the insurrectionists. The book has run into four editions in Polish and is considered one of the most fundamental titles on the subject. Today, we know differently about the uprising, the ghetto, and the Holocaust—we know less. The heroes of their stories are gone from the world of the living. And we are forgetting, because time, because events, because the further the past recedes, the weaker its influence is on our perception of the world. So, I explain more with both extensive notes and period photographs of everyday life.

The photographs supplementing the conversations, most of them never previously published, are from the extraordinary Collection of Łukasz Biedka. This is not ordinary, because the world captured in it is not ordinary; it is *extraordinary* because eighty years on, we are able to look into the eyes of those who were there. Photographs in ghettos were mostly taken by Germans (soldiers had cameras and were exempt from prohibitions), rarely by Jews (sometimes people employed in the Judenrat might take photographs covertly for propaganda purposes), and very rarely by Poles (we know, for instance, of a dozen or so photographs snapped in secret in the ghetto during the uprising by a Polish fireman). These from the Collection of Łukasz Biedka have not been attributed to any

identifiable author; it is likely that all of them, or the vast majority, were taken by German soldiers.

I propose that these conversations be read—even more so today, as the hydra of nationalism once again rears its threatening head in Poland and all over the world—with a dual understanding: as a documentary record of a cruel time and also as a record of ways of thinking and stances that are present in every age.

Depositions, testimonies, paradocumentaries, fictionalized forms: much has been and still is being written on the Holocaust. And though the Holocaust seems like an impossible experience to record, we are constantly recording it. We cannot extricate ourselves from the recording of it. We seek a non-existent form for content that is too much to bear. To rediscover someone's death, re-decipher a fragment of a stranger's fate—in the tatters and scraps of memories. To jot them down, on another scrap of processed memory. To find a detail that will be ours: a red sweater, a girl with a piece of bread roll on Waliców Street, a polka-dot dress, coupons cut out . . . We scour yet another text for a detail to take for our own. And in between is space for silence. Without silence there can be no recording of the Holocaust. And a moment later, we can comprehend, for a moment, that non-conveyable reality, and once again we understand that mute space, for beyond it is concealed a detail that will enable us to touch, for a second, that imagined world.

Marek Edelman says: there were two hundred twenty of us insurrectionists. Some historian writes: the ŻOB numbered four hundred fifty to five hundred people. There is no knowing how many soldiers made up the Jewish Fighting Organization—how many there were in January 1943 or how many in April 1943. We do know that in the night of April 18/19, twenty-two ŻOB groups stood ready to fight. Each group is assumed to have numbered around twelve fighters. And then the couriers, men and women, Jews and Poles, inside the ghetto and outside its walls. We know that there cannot have been fewer than two hundred twenty ŻOB fighters, and that there were not more of them than four hundred.

There were also others that fought in the uprising. Those known as “wildcats” (lit. “wild ones”), for instance. Armed after a fashion, they operated alone or in small groups, defending themselves in bunkers and ruins. There were also small groups along party lines that did not join the ŻOB, but perhaps had some form of contact with it. And then there was the other armed formation: the Jewish Military Union (ŻZW)—the soldiers who fought the battle on Muranowski

Square. I do not write about any of these in this book. I have set out to talk about the soldiers of the Jewish Fighting Organization: to reconstruct this army that was never written down anywhere.

In June, or perhaps it was July 1943, Celina Lubetkin, Antek Cukierman, and Marek Edelman were living in hiding at 4 Komitetowa Street (in the home of Mrs. Stasia Kopikowa, who successfully kept her true Jewish identity under wraps, and played the role of captain's wife in front of her neighbors). Celina, Antek, and Marek decided to write down the names of the ŻOB soldiers who had been murdered in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. They reproduced those names from memory. "After all, we all knew each other," Marek said. And they signed it off with the sentence: "This list is not complete owing to a lack of information on the other members of the ŻOB." Marek Edelman remembered that they wrote down two hundred twenty names. The list was probably taken to the apartment shared by Józef Sak and Tadek Borzykowski for safekeeping. It was probably Sak who took it to Żurawia Street, to Ignacy Samsonowicz. And it was most likely in November 1943 that Leon Feiner sent the list in microfilm form to London. It is possible that the addressees were Emanuel Sherer and Ignacy Schwarzbart.

I reread the "London list" of the soldiers who made up the Jewish Fighting Organization. Two hundred twenty-two names (there is a mistake in the numbering), each one with a letter representing the organization to which they belonged: D for Dror, B for the Bund, Sz for Haszomer Hacair. In January 1945, Melekh Neustadt came to Warsaw from Palestine. He, Marek, Antek, and Kazik sat together in the Polonia Hotel. Neustadt had the London list with him. He asked all about the ones who had been killed. In 1946, he wrote his book *Hurban begetto varsha*, and in it he noted down what he had heard in Warsaw and what he had found out in Palestine about the April insurrectionists.

After that, the London list was forgotten. It was probably in 2001 that I asked Marek Edelman whether anybody had ever written down the names of the April ŻOB fighters, the Warsaw ghetto insurrectionists. And it was then that Edelman remembered that they had sent the list they had written down on Komitetowa Street to London. A few weeks later, I was looking through papers that had been stored for nearly sixty years in a cardboard box that someone had labelled "Jews." I brought a copy of the London list back with me to Warsaw.

I am trying to reread it once again. In 2022, one more time. Because I am still receiving letters, handwritten and typewritten, telephone calls from Poland and abroad, and in them minor corrections, additions, adjustments, scraps of new detail. Lodzia Hamersztajn, for instance, asked me to be sure to correct the address of the postwar kibbutz at Poznańska Street: they lived at no. 38, not at

no. 58. Majus Nowogrodzki wrote that in the new edition I must stress that Michał Klepfisz was awarded the *Virtuti Militari*, and that a copy of the certificate confirming his decoration is held in YIVO, in New York. And Genia Pocalun wrote that Niuta Tajtelbaum loved animals.

The London list is in all certainty incomplete. It does not include the names of so many insurrectionists: those who survived are not on it, and those who perished but whom no one remembered are not on it. It is also, in a sense, erroneous: it does include the names of people who by April, or even by January 1943, were no longer in the ghetto. (There is the group of twelve *Halutzim* who were killed in Hrubieszów in 1942. There are also the names of three Kraków ŻOB members on it.)

My list is also incomplete, perhaps incorrect, and likewise erroneous. I recorded the names of 246 April insurgents, as well as twenty-nine Jewish and thirteen Polish ŻOB couriers. I found twenty names of ŻOB members who were murdered in January 1943. I counted 308 Warsaw ŻOB members who were alive in January 1943. 275 of them fought in the April uprising. Twenty of them were killed in the January operation. (This book does not contain the stories of ŻOB members who were arrested, or of ŻOB members murdered before January 1943.) I established that thirty-one of the insurgents survived the uprising and the war. I am unable—in any case, it is probably impossible by now—to create a full list of those names.

I collect scraps and snippets of all manner of notes and use them to discern stories of friendships, of longing for Eretz Israel, of unfinished lovings; I write down stories about dying. I seek out the detail through which I can come to an imagination of that world. I want to preserve as much as possible. Sometimes, I find nothing; all that remains is a name from the List. I write a little in others' words, a little in my own. In the Jewish texts, a boy was light-haired—not blond, but exactly that: light-haired. So, in my book Jurek Blones is light-haired, and so is Zygmunt Frydrych. Some expressions sound unnatural, clunky, or awkward: that during a raid, people were found, that someone looked “too dangerous” or had “safe looks,” that a boy was “in a pair with” a girl. I didn't want to smooth those expressions out.

It's too late for a book like that, Marek Edelman said in 2001. Because although he was adamant that the detail was of no consequence—the historical, not the narrative detail—he did want things to be true, real, “without embroidery.” But it wouldn't have been possible to write it all down any more realistically before, either. Because people's accounts, both the first and the most recent, are full of their own rememberings, full of distortions and non-memory. Sometimes unintentionally, though sometimes deliberately, a text by a participant or witness

will create a new reality. Marek Edelman claimed that there are no true accounts because they are all “colored up.” Facts and legends intermingle; crooked memories become tangled.

And this is the way our memory of history is constructed. And this is the way our memory of history is falsified. I came across a story about an insurrectionist called Aleksander. His surname had not been remembered. Some historian wrote that Aleksander was probably Efraim Fondamiński. In one book, Fondamiński was given the codename Aleksander. In the next, that name isn’t even mentioned; all that remains was Efraim Fondamiński, the PPR leader in the ŻOB command. He was nothing to do with Aleksander. Fondamiński was no longer in existence in October 1942; he must have been killed in the *große Aktion*. But Aleksander perished in the uprising, on Miła, Marek Edelman claimed. This is how history is falsified: with forgotten facts, invented stories, imagined feelings. A myth emerges which sometimes, for a moment is stripped of its archeology.

The uprising in the ghetto ended on May 8, or maybe 10, Marek Edelman said. The active uprising went on until April 23 or 24, Antek Cukierman claimed. The uprising ended on April 28, Kazik Ratajzer told me. A different memory because of a different experience, a different way of seeing, and consequently—a different story.

Or a different example: in 1951, Bronisław Mirski (formerly Sławek Friedman) talked about his experiences as an insurrectionist with Bernard Mark, who was a historian, the director of the JHI, an activist in the ruling Polish United Workers’ Party, and wrote his own version of those events from the past. Bronisław Mirski said that he had been in contact with Sara Żagiel in the ghetto. As Żagiel had left-wing sympathies, Mark wrote that Mirski had belonged to a communist youth group. Many years later, another historian repeated that record. But Sławek Mirski told me sadly in 2014 that he had never been a communist. This is how history is falsified.

The “List of those who fell in the defense of the Warsaw ghetto”—what I call the London list—is a primary source for these stories about the April insurgents in the ghetto. I reproduce that list and copy it out carefully. Then I impose my order on it: I add more names of January and April insurrectionists, mark the names of those whose names were on the list erroneously, and record the names of Jewish and Polish ŻOB couriers. I count the insurrectionists and talk about them. I give their forenames, the various versions, their variant spellings: many forenames, and a brief story. Sometimes it is no more than a formula: the name was recorded, and I found no further information.

In 2014, Aleksander Edelman asked me why Chawka Folman’s biography is not in the book. Because Chawka wasn’t in the uprising, I answered. (She was

arrested in December 1942). Someone asked about Reginka Justman. (Reginka was in Krakow, not in Warsaw.) This, my rereading of the list of ŻOB members who took part in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, was authorized by Marek Edelman. And although it is not without hidden errors, this is how it will remain.

I wrote “Rereading the List” with the words I heard, and hear, these stories. (Because language, like image, can sometimes show, rather than explain). I hear that “Marek Edelman has a straight backbone” and that “such was the power of Abrasza’s words,” that “Masza was in a pair with Jakubek,” “someone was given an assurance in the ‘shop,” and someone else “had safe looks.” And if I write that “he was proud, so he was well suited to being a courier,” it means that many Jews were not suited for the role of courier because they were afraid—outside the ghetto even more so than inside it. “Leon Feiner died in his bed”: in his bed, and not on a heap of garbage, not in a gas chamber, and not even on the street. Quite simply: he died in his bed. Cukierman wrote that Artsztajn spoke “in a Jewish [Yiddish] full of pathos and exclamation marks, but it was a genuine language.” So, I write that Artsztajn spoke in a genuine language, whatever that might mean or have meant, whatever we might be able to decipher from that. Let those listening to my stories of others decide.

In these insurrectionists’ stories there is no fact, no event, no information, no adjective used out of a need for invention, supplementation, or beautification. All of them are taken from *somewhere*. (From written texts or my conversations. Once, Ala Margolis introduced me to a friend as: Hanka, who for twenty years has been talking to Jews who are still alive.) And that “somewhere” is important here because it means that this information has a source, but it is not the source that is important. In a sense it is even unimportant. Unimportant because no one can know how credible it is. And unimportant because memory and remembering are not about sources. Memory rapidly distances itself from its source, becoming autonomous, so that stories about that past likewise become autonomous.

I write: “recorded,” “remembered,” “written down somewhere”; sometimes I write “a historian mentioned.” This is a way of saying that the information that I give exists beyond the source document, that some fact, on this occasion recounted (recorded) by me, is now beyond verification, that the authority of the source is no longer important. When I heard Marek Edelman’s words that “Masza remembers it well,” I called Masza Putermilch. As I record her memory, I use her name. I often use the names of those whom I talked to over several years. I wanted to “talk their memory out of them” as much as I could. Hear it and record it. Phrases and scraps of their stories that I took away from those conversations resounded in my head afterwards. I recorded the stories and the

recounting of others. My book is a retelling of others' stories (which are also a little bit mine).

I Came Home and There Was No One There is a composition of two titles in a single volume for readers in English. We—the author, the translator, and the publisher—propose this composition because the two books supplement each other, are mutually complementary, form a single whole. The volume is a collection of the salvaged vestiges of memory of hundreds of the people who experienced that time and place: the Warsaw ghetto.

The preface addresses both parts of the book. The first part is a collection of the transcripts of ten conversations with former ŻOB soldiers, entitled “Recording the Holocaust.” The core of the second section is composed of the pieced-together stories of those individuals, which commemorate that army in this lapidarium of words. This is followed by a reproduction of the London list of the ŻOB members and my own rereading of how the organization was divided into the various fighting groups, and the positions they defended in the ghetto. And finally, the extensive third part: the glossary, composed of the notes on names, terms, and concepts. (This part could, in fact, be read as an introduction to that world and that time.) My first guide to this past, Marek Edelman, in his afterword concludes the book.

Translation is always a challenge. In this case doubly so. In the Polish, I attempted to reproduce the uneven, characteristic, sometimes difficult language of my interlocutors, so as to retain their description of their world. Together, we decided to leave all proper names in the form in which they were used in that dual, Polish-Jewish world. We therefore deliberately did not transliterate press titles, school names, or organizations as an English-language reader of translations direct from Yiddish or Hebrew might expect to see them; likewise, given names and surnames are preserved as they functioned in their Polish context and featured in written sources from school registers to contemporary newspaper articles. We nonetheless—or, perhaps, even precisely in this way—hope to have created in this translation images that are immediate and comprehensible, though the world they describe is so distant and alien.

Hanka Grupińska
Warsaw, October 2, 2022



What Was of Importance in the Ghetto? Nothing! Nothing! Don't Be Ridiculous!

A conversation with Marek Edelman conducted with
Włodzimierz Filipek for the Poznań-based
underground quarterly *Czas* in 1985.

We'd like to ask what you did before the war. Society knows you as a soldier of the ŻOB,¹ as an insurrectionist in the Warsaw ghetto,² but we're interested in your genealogy, your family. Where did you live? What schools did you go to? Those are all things that nobody knows.

Ah, yes, those are all things that nobody knows, and above all the courts don't want to recognize . . . but that's of no importance. I lived in Warsaw.

Were you born in Warsaw?

Let's say that. That's what it says in my papers. My mother was a repatriate from Russia, my father was a repatriate, also from Russia—from Belarus, to be precise, because he came from Minsk, Gomel. I was born in Warsaw. Before that, somewhere on the journey, my brother died. And if my brother had survived, I wouldn't have been born at all. My parents died very shortly afterwards.

Why did your parents leave Gomel and emigrate from Russia to Poland?

In all honesty, I can't tell you, because of course I wasn't born at that point. I can't imagine it was anti-communism. It might have been, but I can't tell you.

Was it for political reasons?

It may have been. After all, all the Poles who had Polish citizenship were leaving Russia at that point.

Did your parents have Polish citizenship?

I don't think my mother did, but my father did, so my mother was automatically entitled to it.

1 p. 500 Glossary—Jewish Fighting Organization.

2 p. 519 Glossary.

How old were you when you were left alone?

Now that's something I don't exactly know. My father died when I was maybe four or five, in 1924, or maybe in 1926, and I was born in 1922.³ I remember him from sitting on his knee, but nothing more than that.

And your mom?

And my mom died in 1934, I think. So, I was twelve, maybe thirteen. But I don't know exactly because the cemetery where she was buried was bombed twice. Once in 1939, and later in the Warsaw rising.⁴ There is no trace of her memorial. When I took my high school finals in 1939, I decided I ought to go to my mother's grave and tell her that I passed my exams. Back then, you could still make out where her grave was, but they were building roads, or something, and by 1940 the grave was no longer there.

What did your father do?

The very interesting thing is that nobody knows. Nobody in my house knows. I mean, maybe they did know, but I was too small for them to tell me. My mother worked in the administrative department of a children's hospital, always on the late shift. She came home at four in the morning, when I was asleep, and there was only Frania at home.

Who was Frania?

Frانيا was just Frania. I had no family. My parents came from Russia. Mom had twelve brothers, all SRs.⁵ I don't know whether it was in 1918 or in what year it was that the Bolsheviks came to Gomel and took all twelve brothers out of the house. (The reason that Grandfather had so many children was because he was waiting for a daughter—don't laugh, it's important!) And when they had all twelve of the brothers lined up in front of the Poniatowski monument to shoot them, along she comes, this *malenkaia devochka*, and walks into the midst of them.⁶ And this Russkii *chubarik* says: "Devushka, udirai!"⁷ They shot all twelve brothers, and she was left alone. After the war, I think, the daughter of the eldest brother turned up here. Tania, her name was, but she's not here anymore. I mean, maybe she is; in any case, I had no other family than that. If they could shoot twelve brothers for being

3 Marek Edelman was born on January 1, 1919. Here he gave his year of birth as 1922 to avoid the danger of being subjected to forced retirement. (This was one of the methods of repression employed by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland.)

4 p. 520 Glossary.

5 p. 516 Glossary—Socialist Revolutionary Party.

6 Rus.: little girl.

7 *Chubarik* (Rus.)—word historically used in Russian and Ukrainian to refer to a soldier of the lowest rank, a private; Rus.: Girl, scarper!

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