



ŻYDOM POLSKIM | TO POLISH JEWS TO THE MEMORY OF SZMUL ZYGIELBOJM

*From Polish towns and from shtetls no
desperate cries reach the ears,
Like warriors, the last defenders of
Warsaw ghetto lie fallen
In blood I soak my compassion, my heart
in a flood of tears
For you, Polish Jews, I write this - a
homeless Polish poet.*

*Bloodthirsty dogs, and not humans,
not soldiers but brutal henchmen
Came to kill you and your wives,
not sparing the children crying,
To suffocate in gas chambers, to
choke with lime in the transports,
And ridicule the defenseless, the
terrified and the dying.*

*But you raised the stone, defiant, to hurl
it at the assailant
Who cynically aimed his cannon to level
your home to rubble
O sons of the Maccabees noble, you
also fought and died valiant
With no ray of hope standing up to our
common, patriotic struggle.*

*Let this be carved as in granite
forever in Polish tradition:
Our common home has been
trampled; one common foe we both
face,
Auschwitz and Dachau unite us,
and every street execution,
And every bar in each prison, and
each nameless resting place.*

*One common sky mid the ruins above
our Warsaw will spread
With many years toil and struggle
victoriously left behind,
To each giving freedom and law and to
each one a bite of bread.
And but one human race will flourish; the
highest: the noble kind.*

**TRANSLATED BY WITOLD
LILIENTAL**

Poem by Władysław Broniewski – To
Polish Jews, 1943 r. (Translated by
Witold Liliental)

They fought a common struggle...

April 19th marks the 79th anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, and this prompts me to share with readers some thoughts, carried in my mind since many years.

As a Pole with Jewish roots, I survived the Nazi occupation, thanks to the help of good people, on the so-called “Aryan” side of the wall, with a changed name. Being a small child, I was not even aware of what the world today knows as Holocaust.

My entire adult life to this day passed in the shadow of a never ending and emotional discussion about Polish-Jewish relations. My mother, also equipped with false identity papers, and surviving outside of the ghetto, additionally jeopardizing her safety by teaching clandestine high school groups, which was forbidden in occupied Poland, raised me in the Polish tradition with a special cult for my father, a Polish reserve officer murdered by the Soviets in the Katyń massacre. In my life I crossed paths with multitudes of wonderful and open-minded Poles, but I also had several incidents with people whose ill-oriented Polish patriotism prompted them to express only contempt or hatred toward Jews, as well as refusal of my right to call myself Polish.

The uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto has been written about many times, even as I happened to hear from some individuals “ad nauseam”. Today I want to relate to opinions about it which for years have been voiced by some people. Some of the earliest enunciations, dating back to the 1960’s in Communist Poland, began with the words: “I am not an anti-Semite, but...” Usually after these words I listened to frustration with the fact that foreign visitors to Warsaw are led by tourist guides to the Monument of Ghetto



Jewish cemetery at Okopowa Street, April 2007

Heroes and old about the uprising of Jews in 1943, while remembrance of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944 is not mentioned and foreign tourists leave Warsaw associating this city almost solely with Jewish martyrdom. Some Poles went as far as seeing some anti-Polish Jewish conspiracy. The facts happen to be true but should be explained by the politics of the time. Leading all foreign tourists to the Ghetto Monument and keeping mostly silent about the Warsaw Uprising stemmed from the still present animosity towards the Home Army, the Polish Resistance loyal to the Polish Government in Exile. Up until 1956, when Gomulka came into power, the Warsaw Uprising and those who fought in the Home Army were treated with utmost hostility. It should be explained that it broke out to liberate Warsaw before the Red Army reached it. Thus, while it was militarily directed against the Nazis, politically it was aimed against the Soviets. After 1956, the odium was partially removed and Poles could commemorate their heroes, but this worked only for home use. Foreign policy remained pretty much similar. Telling foreign tourists about the heroism of the

1944 insurgents was highly inconvenient to the then Polish powers. It would cause questions raised why it happened which the group guide would have to answer, thus opening Pandora's box. On the other hand, the aim of the uprising in the ghetto was understood without the need of any explanations to all foreign tourists.

Politics also dictated manipulations, in this case in the opposite direction, when publishing statistics of deaths and martyrdom. For the comfort of Communist powers, the published numbers of Jewish victims of Auschwitz were purposely lowered while Polish martyrdom was highlighted. In this case the measure was designed to stir up belligerent feelings towards "revanchists" from the Federal Republic of Germany. Writing and publicly speaking about the martyrdom of Poles mass deported by the Soviets to Siberia and Kazakhstan, as well as the murder of ca. 20 thousand Polish officers in what is now known as the Katyń massacre was strictly forbidden.

Official statistics showed a number topping 6 million of Polish citizens who lost their lives as the result of World War II. I do not know the exact statistics and



Witold Liliental in Warsaw, April 2007

base what I write about on publicly accessible documents. These show that approx. half of the victims were Jews, including Poles with Jewish roots. The remaining half were either ethnic Poles or Poles with backgrounds other than Jewish (e.g. Ukrainian, Lithuanian, etc.) including both soldiers killed in action as well as people who perished in concentration camps. All of the 3 million Jews who were Polish citizens were victims of the Holocaust. Simple calculation shows that Polish Jews who before the war made up approx. 10% of the population, constitute half of all the victims, a disproportionately high tally. It's not a question of senseless competing who suffered more, because numbers are obvious, but one of explaining why the world first and foremost sees the Holocaust. But it is also well known that there was a basic difference between conditions on both sides of the ghetto wall. Poles were terrorized. They were denied freedom, the right to education above elementary and, in some cases, to life. Jews were denied the right to life (so the right to education was a moot point) and they were dehumanized. Poles, after destroying the intellectual elite, were to

become farm boys and servants to German masters, while "Untermensch" could have only one destination. In the occupant's conviction, Jews, like all lice and nits, were to be exterminated, en masse and effectively, at minimum investment costs.

Some Poles voiced dissatisfaction mixed with jealousy when the world saw the famous gesture by Willy Brandt who in 1970 knelt in humility before the Monument of Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw. In my thinking, he was undoubtedly under an inflow of strong emotion and acted like a great statesman. He himself had been an anti-Nazi fighter, working with the Norwegian Underground during the war. He came to Warsaw as the leader of the free German nation and in its name showed remorse for the greatest crime perpetrated in the 20th century. It would not be out of place to mention that some German groups protested with slogans "not in our name" and smearing the Chancellor with invectives for allegedly being "anti-German". Some Poles complained that Willy Brandt, on a state visit in Poland, knelt before a "Jewish" monument and not some other "purely Polish" object.

One can try to understand some long-harbored grief caused by quashing national memory but, objectively speaking, one cannot wonder at the German chancellor's gesture. His nation, in the eyes of most people of this world, was responsible for the greatest hecatomb in the history of mankind and he had to carry this stigma, although not guilty himself. He found himself in a place which the entire world associated with the desperate stand of Jews, probably the first such since the Maccabi's. He found himself in the very heart of what had once been the Warsaw Ghetto. I do not see any lack of tact towards Poles. The fight and martyrdom of Jews in Poland is a component of our common Polish history and as such, should be honoured together by both communities.

Each nation should preserve in collective memory its history and heroes, its time of suffering and its victims. Polish history has not been the kindest and the last two centuries are filled with both heroism and suffering. Anniversary remembrance ceremonies in all countries are designed to keep up memories of important events in order to take lessons

from them how to act in future. As the result of unfavourable political circumstances, at certain times Poles were denied the right to speak about and to show the world its unhealed wounds, its suffering and its losses, however incomparable to those of the Jews. This led some to an unhealthy competition with Jews for the first place in suffering. Does the fact that significantly more Jews were murdered than Poles constitute some kind of detriment or shame for the Polish nation? Of course, it does not but in the mentality of some people, it deprives Poles their deserved share of sympathy from other nations of the world.

It should be remembered that the main acts of mass murder of Jews by Nazis happened on Polish soil. This was no coincidence, but precise economic calculation of death transports through Europe, and the chief planner was Adolf Eichmann. Poland is situated in the central region of occupied Europe and further away from the eyes of Allies. It was also geographically close to the purveyors of the technology of death such as builders of cremation furnaces and the IG Farben plants, manufacturing Zyklon B

Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 2007



poison gas. Thus, Poland was to Nazis the ideal place where the whole murderous undertaking of the “ultimate solution to the Jewish problem” could be organized most effectively with least possible cost.

There is, therefore, nothing strange in the fact that Jews from worldwide come to honour the victims of the Holocaust to Poland. Just as the slopes of Monte Cassino or the cemetery of the Eagles (defenders of the city of then Polish city of Lwów in 1919), as well as Katyń forest are sacred to Poles, to Jews places like Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor and part of Warsaw which was known as the Ghetto, have a right to be sacred. It simply all happened right here. Incidentally, it is uncertain whether Poles will still be able to visit the Katyń memorial site after Putin’s aggression against Ukraine.

It is not my aim to recount the actual uprising which has been told much better by many competent historians. Let me only add that it was begun by several hundred fighters, mostly young, coming from different movements and believing in different political ideologies. They united at a time when it became clear that the German Nazi occupant foresaw only one future for them - the mass annihilation of the entire nation. The uprising began at a time when almost all the population of the ghetto had been already deported to gas chambers and when insurgents, taking up this heroic fight had the awareness that further fight is hopeless. During the uprising in the ghetto, some units of the Home Army attempted to come with support. On Bonifraterska street, a company of the Home Army, commanded by Capt. Józef Pszenny (military alias „Chwacki”) fought against the German troops. I also know that Capt. Zbigniew Lewandowski (military alias “Szyrna”), later to be one of the professors who taught me at the Warsaw University of Technology, took part in the ghetto fighting, but I do not know any details. I mention this not to absolve Poles of any wrongdoing but rather to show the good side. Unfortunately, we know of the bad side too.

Poles constitute the highest national number among those recognized as “Righteous among the peoples of the world”. This speaks of the great heroism of many. But during the occupation there were also the “schmaltzovniks” – blackmailers who used the plight of Jews to get rich, there were those who informed the Gestapo and even murderers. Then there was a great mass of people who did nothing because they were either indifferent or paralyzed by fear. Poland is by no means an exception in this regard. In each nation one can find all shades of attitudes and behaviors, from the degenerate to the shining examples of virtue. Let us remember that aiding a Jew during the occupation demanded not simple courage but heroism.

It is sometimes said that the uprising in the ghetto was decided in order to “die with honor”. I do not agree. Does it follow that those who perished in gas chambers are to be denied honour?

I sometimes heard accusations, expressed with a shade of contempt, that Jews went to death “like cattle”, without putting up a fight. First of all, the heroes of Warsaw Ghetto did put up a fight! Has anyone ever thought of using such words to describe the last route of Polish officers, with their hands tied with wire behind their backs, led through the Katyń forest and forced to kneel at the edge of a pit, to be murdered? No honest human being ever loses his or her honour, not even when captured and led to die. Does the fact that a person has no possibility of offering physical resistance is to be deprived of dignity?

Why then, did the heroes of Warsaw Ghetto decide to resist with arms? Young Jewish fighters, in the face of total extermination of their community, decided to take up arms, sacrificing their blood and lives to stir the conscience of all nations and to let the world know about what the Nazi occupant is doing to Jews in Warsaw and in other places in Europe. To let the world open its eyes and see the unheard of before crime of genocide. The world did open its eyes, but this happened much later and by that time Poland was already subjected to Communist rule.

How strong must have been the profoundly inhuman nature of the Nazis if we remind here that Jurgen Stroop, the SS general who commanded the pacification of the uprising in the ghetto decided to level the ghetto terrain as a birthday present to Hitler.

After the defeat some fighters managed to get through to the "Aryan" side. They and many other Jews later fought on the barricades of Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Marek Edelman, a member of the commanding group, survived the war and remained in Poland. He became a respected surgeon. His popularity may be shown by the fact that he was voted delegate of Solidarity at a time when this Union struggled for justice and liberation. Mark Edelman has never been heard to utter a derogatory word about Poland or Polish people.

Among Jews, as in every nation, one can also find people who hold extreme views, people who are not well informed and harbor anti-Polish sentiments. Generalization is the worst wrong in interracial relations. Some Jews who have had bad experiences with a Pole, are apt to accuse the entire Polish nation of anti-Semitism. Although there are, indeed, many anti-Semites still active in Poland, it is by no means the norm. Some Jews, not knowing the historical truth, and negatively biased against Poland are apt to circulate half-truths or even false information which, in turn, generates anti-Jewish sentiments among some people in Poland.

On the opposite side, some Poles, backed by the extreme right, circulate views about alleged Jewish hatred towards Poles, as illustrated by the brutality of courts of law and state security during times of Stalinist terror which included some communists with Jewish background. In this way, the crimes of a handful of people acting on

behalf of the Communist regime were extended to accuse all Jews. Today, people with such views exhibit frustration with every Pole with Jewish roots who attained a public position. They are against all acts of Polish-Jewish solidarity, as well as all remembrance of Jewish martyrdom.

With dogged stubbornness they strive to portray all Poles as solely without sin, allegedly most involved in rescuing Jews who are now so ungrateful. They voice their frustration at all Marches of the Living in Auschwitz, as well as at the fact that Jews have to commemorate "their" anniversaries in Poland of all places.

But are these only Jewish anniversaries? I view them as simply panhuman. I also view remembrance of various events in the past as a part of common history and culture of Poles and Jews.

Several years ago, when I lived in Montreal, a Polish Catholic priest asked me if I could write a text for a Final Roll Call honouring fallen Polish soldiers which would be read at a Polish school ceremony in connection with the traditional Day of the Deceased. I wrote it, not leaving out anyone who fought both in the country and on other fronts to liberate Poland. I cited the airmen, the sailors, the underground guerillas and soldiers from every possible army. I also included the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The priest had no problem whatsoever with this. The Final roll Call was staged very solemnly. I myself read the Roll Call and after naming each group, boy scouts responded with the words "Fallen on the field of glory!" with a snare drum background. The text I wrote made an impression on the teachers and I was asked to make that same Final Roll Call available for next years' commemoration. This time it was read by the scouts themselves.

Soon after it began someone whispered in my ear not to be surprised that the text has been “slightly changed” because young people don’t understand some things”. I listened on and realized that the change was indeed very small. From the entire text only one fragment was removed, and I don’t have to say here which. Somebody obviously deemed it either “compromising” or “not ours”. There seems to be no shortage of stupidity or extremism in any nation. The need of justice requires me to add that when I was leaving Montreal, the new principal of the school asked me for that same text, assuring me that this time there will be no cuts.

What can one say after so many years about those whose ashes remained under the rubble of the ghetto? The struggle taken up by the fighters of the Jewish Fighting Organization cannot be regarded as solely Jewish. This uprising was an integral part of the common struggle of Jews and Poles against a common enemy. From the moment of the outbreak of the uprising right up until its fall, two flags fluttered in the wind from the rooftop of one of the buildings: Polish and Jewish (There was no Israel yet). The uprising of Warsaw Ghetto will forever remain an act of common, intertwined Polish and Jewish history. I think that all of us should be proud of it. Jewish martyrdom is our common suffering as human beings. Regardless of ethnicity, religion or social persuasion. Moreover, this uprising happened on Polish soil. Many of the fighters spoke Polish. Many regarded Poland as their own country.

It is not their fault that during Communists times Poles were not allowed to honour some of their war heroes, until 1956 members of the Home Army, and until Poland regained its independence in 1989, victims of

the Katyń massacre or those deported to Siberia. It is not their fault that anti-Semitic centres in Poland once again raise their heads and with impunity stage Jew-hating marches and meetings, stirring unhealthy emotions in Polish-Jewish relations. Finally, it is not their fault that among Jews worldwide one can also find people with extreme anti-Polish views.

I would like to believe that slogans of hate, visible on banners carried in the so-called Independence March, as well as the recent hate show put up by extreme nationalists in the city of Kalisz can be deemed marginal. These have been strongly condemned by many honest Poles who were enraged by what they saw or heard.

Heroes, regardless of which nation they belong to, deserve respect and memory. The ones I wrote about here, began an uneven struggle and fought heroically. May they rest in peace. To the outside world, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising became a symbol of Jewish response to the Holocaust. It in no way undermines the sufferings of Poles.

Witold Liliental

**“NEVER AGAIN” Association
PO Box 6, 03-700 Warszawa 4**

info@neveragainassociation.org

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