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Wall, Hero, and Text: Heroic Narrative Encounters the Warsaw Ghetto

by

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For Andy,

because you made it possible.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the intersection of the heroic narrative and the Warsaw Ghetto. It considers both Polish and Jewish texts; Marek Edelman's *The Ghetto Fights* and Hanna Krall's *To Outwit God* both vigorously reject the heroic narrative because of its reliance on the beautiful death and implicit devaluation of the 'passive death.' In *Courier from Warsaw,* Jan Nowak subsumes the ghetto within the Polish heroic narrative so that the Jewish experience disappears within a nationalised chronicle of suffering. Jan Karski's *Story of a Secret State* emphasises the heroism of bearing witness, but falters when testimony fails to effect change. Ultimately, the imposition of the heroic narrative on the Warsaw Ghetto is an attempt to order the experience of the Shoah. In both Polish and Jewish accounts, the heroic narrative tries to reassemble a fragmented ghetto, and offers the tantalising promise that suffering may be redeemed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My question is philosophical. What does a ghetto mean, in your opinion?

Claude Lanzmann

"Two Deaths"

Your death and our death
Are two different deaths.
Your death is a strong death,
the death that tears to pieces.
Your death is in the fields
fecund with sweat and blood.
Your death is death from bullets,
For something, for Fatherland.
Our death is stupid death,
in attics, in the basement.
Our death gets us like dogs,
from around the corner.
Your death is ordinary,
human and not so hard.
Our death is garbage death,
Jewish death and putrid.

Władysław Szlengel

"There was no one else like him alive./ In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth" (*Beowulf* 15). In the oldest surviving English epic, King Hrothgar and his people are terrorised by Grendel, a monster who comes at night to hunt and feed on humans. The demon's strength is terrifying, and of the many Danes who valiantly try to defeat him, none survive. As his power grows, Grendel invades Heorot, Hrothgar's great mead hall, and every night the grand public space is

occupied by the stalking monster. For twelve years the demon hunts Hrothgar's people unvanquished, until Beowulf of the Geats travels from a neighbouring land to defeat Grendel. At nightfall the Danes retreat to safe shelter while Beowulf waits in the mead hall for the demon. After a bloody battle Beowulf tears off Grendel's arm and the monster flees the bright public hall for the cover of night. The public space of Heorot is restored, and the community gathers safely again, the monster's murderous arm now a disembodied trophy displayed on the wall.

Beowulf is an exemplar of the heroic narrative. It neatly displays the conventions of the genre, and indeed, along with a handful of similar texts, is the basis of the heroic epic's scholarly definition. However, in the modern era not all narratives fit the heroic genre's conventions quite as easily as the battle between Beowulf and Grendel. This thesis is concerned with one such uneasy match of genre and subject matter: the encounter between the heroic narrative and the Warsaw Ghetto. The heroic narrative frequently appears in the literature of the Holocaust, and as the genre strains to adequately represent the ghetto, troubling implications emerge. For the purpose of these introductory remarks, *Beowulf* will serve as an example of the conventional heroic narrative, which is so profoundly challenged by the Holocaust. Beowulf's tale is thus a fixed point in a somewhat abstract initial discussion of the heroic narrative's limitations.

Beowulf does what all other men failed to do: he reunites the body politic that was splintered by Grendel. In his foundational work *On Heroes, Hero-*

Worship and the Heroic, Thomas Carlyle[1] argues that the hero is primarily defined by impact on the external world:

> They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world. (Carlyle 1-2)

The hero is thus measured by the successful achievement of effective action, regardless of the context. In this sense the heroic narrative does not acknowledge circumstances which forbid effective action. Joseph Campbell concurs with Carlyle when he observes, "It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse" (391). The hero, like Beowulf, affects the world, and this positive change profoundly alters society. Leonard Lutwack asserts that this effectiveness is essential to the heroic narrative, which is characterised by "heroic self-sacrifice and the persistent faith in purposeful action" (xii). This "purposeful action" is of a particular kind. In the heroic narrative, action not only affects the external world, but does so with significance: "[T]he epic is always marked by aggrandisement, or the imparting of

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[1] As a point of interest, Carlyle's frequent use of incendiary metaphors to describe the hero's effect on his/her world has unintended resonance after the Holocaust: "But I liken common languid Times, with their unbelief, distress, perplexity....all this I liken to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightening out of Heaven that shall kindle it. The great man is the lightening....All blazes round him now, when he has once struck on it, into fire like his own....In all epochs of the world's history, we shall find the Great Man to have been the indispensable saviour of his epoch; -- the lightening, without which the fuel would never have been burnt" (20). After Auschwitz, the figure of a man who sets an age on fire in order to save it is more ambiguous than in the enlightenment era Carlyle was no doubt invoking.

consequence and gravity to action, character, and theme" (Lutwack 15). Thus Beowulf is not a hero simply because he slays a monster: the real objective of this heroic narrative is maintaining the supremacy of humanity over nature, and order over chaos. Heroic action is meaningful or it is not heroic.[2] Although this meaning may have universal signification, such as in Greek myth, heroic deeds are normally inscribed and signify within particular national narratives at a particular historical moment. As Lascelles Abercrombie observes, an epic is "in some sort, a summation for its time of the values of life" (50).

The heroic narrative and the 'beautiful death'

Ironically, the decisive expression of a hero's effectiveness is often his death. Many years after vanquishing Grendel, Beowulf dies while battling a powerful dragon that slaughtered many of his people. But notably, the King of the Geats dies only after slaying the monster and naming his successor. In the heroic narrative, death is effective; to die is to achieve something. As C.N. Bowra notes of heroic poetry, "it sees in heroic death the fitting fulfilment of a heroic life" (77). The hero may expire in a glorious charge over the hill, thus

---

[2] Although the heroic narrative deals with matters urgent to its own era, the genre's continued relevance was intensely questioned in the twentieth century. Much critical attention has been paid to the heroic narrative's shifting popularity in the modern era, when many "[c]ritics affirm that heroic poetry is an anomaly in our unheroic age" (Foerster vii). See Peter Hägin's The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry, especially pp. 7-14, for an overview of this shift. Briefly, the heroic narrative's decline in relation to the twentieth century's two World Wars may sketched as follows: As Lutwack notes of the years between the world wars in America, "[m]oved by the needs of their time, Steinbeck and Hemingway restore the epic hero and the communal sacrifice for a cause, no matter how desperate and how sordid the circumstances may be" (142). After the Second World War, the heroic narrative shifts again: "[M]ost significant in the odyssey novels of the postwar period is the shift from a serious to a serio-comic point of view. Adopting the serious tone of the traditional epic did not seem possible to writers after World War II…copying traditional heroic patterns must [now] be done a little ironically" (Lutwack 148).

securing victory for the righteous. Or s/he may die a martyr's death, sacrificed for a cause that is strengthened by her demise, like Joan of Arc in Shaw's *Saint Joan*. In this case, the community is inspired and perhaps emboldened by the loss of the hero. Alternately, the hero may die to protect the innocent, such as when Beowulf gives his life in battle with the dragon. These heroic deaths also result in fame, and this distinction furthers immortality through the posthumous communal memory of the hero's great deeds. In each of these cases, the hero's end signifies beyond the moment of death. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard refers to the heroic death as "the Athenian 'beautiful death,' the exchange of the finite for the infinite, of the *eschaton* for the *télos*: the *Die in order not to die*" (100). This is the promise of memorialization, in which the loss of life ensures immortality. The hero's sacrifice endures past death in the communal memory; the act is remembered through narrative. In the heroic chronicle, the end of life is not the end of the story.

The heroic narrative founders when confronted with death that is not 'beautiful.' Such a death cannot confer immortality because it occurs in the absence of a common accord. The bond of a collective 'we,' of a relationship between 'I' and 'you,' must exist within a community if death is to be meaningful. The heroic death signifies only when there is mutual acknowledgement of the other's existence. In *Beowulf*, the dragon's death is significant even though the hero and the monster are foes. Despite the fact that the poem does not offer the dragon's point of view, its life and death are nevertheless narrated. Fancifully, one might suppose that his fellow dragons memorialise him in the tale of a hero

who dies in battle with a cruel enemy. Despite their enmity, the 'I' of Beowulf acknowledges the 'you' of the monster. In this sense Beowulf and the dragon exist within the same narrative, and neither's existence is negated.

But this bond of the collective 'we' does not always exist. When death occurs outside of this framework, its power to signify – and therefore to be beautiful – is suddenly threatened. As Theodor Adorno notes, the beautiful death is situationally determined. It is not simply an act of will or a display of noble character; the heroic death is not available to all those who desire it. Beowulf's death is transcendent not because he kills the dragon, but because his death occurs within a context where transcendence is possible. For the beautiful death is wholly contingent upon context: "Death….is not to be extracted from the convolutions of history; for that, the individual is far too much of a historical category" (371). Adorno argues that for those dying in Nazi death camps there is no hope that death can signify beyond itself. In the context of the camps, it seems impossible that any aspect of human life endures beyond death: "The remnant of confidence in [the camp inmates'] transcendent duration vanishes during their life on earth, so to speak: what should be the part of them that is not dying?" (371). What Adorno describes here is death in the absence of the collective 'we.' In the Holocaust, nothing endures past the moment of death, for the disintegration of the 'we' robs the camp inmate's death of meaning. This failure of signification clashes with an essential element of the heroic narrative: "By far the most important ingredient of epic writing, style, and myth are tools of

aggrandizement creating transcendent tone" (Lutwack 22). The heroic narrative is thus reliant on a collective 'we' for the achievement of the hero's immortality.[3]

Lyotard and the Holocaust's fracturing of the 'we'

In the Holocaust no 'we' exists between Nazi and Jew. The two are so distinct that they do not subsist within the same sphere; they share no common law, morality or language. Lyotard observes how, in the death camps, this destruction of the 'we' occurs even at the level of semantics:

> The canonical formula of 'Auschwitz' cannot be *Die, I decree it*, a phrase that allows the equivocation of a possible substitution of I for you to hover. Rather, the formula would be, if we focus on the SS as 'legislator': *That s/he die, I decree it*; or, if we focus on the deportee as the one 'obligated': *That I die, s/he decrees it.* (100)

The imperative formula of "*Die, I decree it*" requires direct interaction between SS and deportee, and as such constitutes a dialogue. An order spoken directly from one to another would occur face to face; the SS would necessarily regard the deportee. In contrast, "*That s/he die, I decree it*" breaks the dialogue between murderer and victim. In this formulation the SS speaks of the deportee in the third person, and interaction between the two is denied by virtue of this intermediate, semantic chasm. The third person form further dissolves the communal 'we' by rendering a response unnecessary. The deportees have no

[3] It is essential to note that the beautiful death's failure in the Holocaust does not mean that Jews are incapable of heroic action, or that great courage was absent in the death camps. It is not heroics that fail in this scenario but transcendence; the heroic narrative cannot represent death that lacks meaning, and thus it is genre that fails rather than individuals.

opportunity to respond to the SS as they are not the addressees of any direct order. As Lyotard notes, it is possible to disobey an imperative. Phrasing the death sentence as an order implicitly acknowledges the possibility of a response, even if that response is disallowed. An imperative must be either obeyed or rejected, while the impersonal formula denies the deportee any such agency. This curious structure actually prevents the deportee from obeying a direct order to die. Such is the extent of the dislocation of the communal 'we': the deportee cannot obey such an order because s/he lacks the necessary authority to do so. Acceptance of a death order is dependent upon the ability to make such a decision. For instance, soldiers may choose to die for their country. Such a death is meaningful because of its sacrifice to an ideal larger than the individual life. But the deportee's status as human subject has been degraded so that s/he no longer has jurisdiction over even the most fundamental choice: s/he does not own her own death. As Lyotard notes, "one cannot give a life that one doesn't have the right to have" (101). There is no collective 'we' because there is no 'you;' the SS failure to recognise the deportee's existence as an independent subject negates the 'you.' Thus the 'we' of the SS and deportee is irretrievably sundered and "[t]here are no stakes held in common by one and the other....there is not even a common idiom" (Lyotard 106). Narratively and metaphysically, the SS and the deportee exist in utterly separate spheres.

Lawrence Weschler explores one instance of the absent 'we' when he notes that the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s "take[s] place in a context wherein the Other, even one's own neighbor, is suddenly being experienced no longer as

a subject like oneself but as an instance, a type, a vile expletive: A Serb, a Croat, a Turk, and, as such, preordained for an ages-old, inevitable fate" (21). Lyotard suggests that in the Nazi death camps even this minimal level of acknowledgement is destroyed. Recognition of the Other solely as Serb, Croat or Turk, although highly restricted, still constitutes acknowledgement of their existence. And to die because you are a Serb permits signification; even lacking a proper name, the victim is martyred and thus transcends death as part of an "immortal, collective name" (Lyotard 101). But Lyotard argues that "'Auschwitz' is the forbiddance of the beautiful death" precisely because it destroys both the individual name and the collective name of 'Jew.' The individual is erased through the use of serial numbers instead of names: thus it is not Abrasha Blum who is gassed, but an anonymous series of digits. From the time he receives the numbered tattoo, 'Abrasha Blum' as an individual name ceases to exist. The collective name is erased through the negation of the Jewish community. Killing the individual, numbered beings also kills the community that would, in life, memorialise the dead. There is no one left to remember, to assign meaning to the death of individual names. In this sense the collective name is killed simply because there are so few members left alive; death cannot be converted into immortal significance if there is no one left to perform this task.

But the collective name is also destroyed through the murder of the death itself. Not only are individual deportees killed, but their deaths are similarly annihilated through the previous negation of the deportees' very existence: "[T]he collective name (Jew) must also be killed in such a way that no we bearing this

name might remain which could take on the deportee's death and eternalise it....If death can be exterminated, it is because there is nothing left to kill. Not even the name Jew" (Lyotard 101). Thus death itself cannot signify because the dead cease to exist long before the moment when life actually ends. The SS refusal to semantically acknowledge the deportee echoes a metaphysical erasure of the Jew. Abrasha Blum is converted into a tattooed entity. For the SS, this being is not a person, and so its death is not really a death. The name 'Jew' is thus obliterated by the annihilation of its component parts. In the death camps, death cannot immortalise or transcend, because nothing has actually died.

This murder of the death is painfully embodied in the film *Architecture of Doom*, which describes the Nazi "cosmetic adjustment of history" in advance of the Allied troops: "Before the Russian onslaught, the mass graves must be opened, the corpses burned and the skeletons ground to dust in bone mills. Weeds will be sown to hide the grave sites." The death itself is erased, so that it bears no significance; death cannot occur if nothing exists to be killed. Thus, for the Nazis, this 'undeath' is not an event of any kind. As this death has no intrinsic meaning, and cannot grant significance to any external cause or person, it is the antithesis of the beautiful death. It is what the poet Władysław Szlengel calls "garbage death,/ Jewish death and putrid."

The heroic narrative in Polish and Jewish accounts of the Warsaw Ghetto

Clearly, the heroic narrative's dependence on the notion of the beautiful death compromises the genre's ability to represent the Holocaust. Indeed, it would seem that given this restriction the genre must utterly fail to represent the Shoah. And yet, the heroic narrative frequently recurs in Jewish chronicles of occupation. It is especially resilient in depictions of Jews who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. But despite the endurance of the heroic narrative, Jewish accounts of the Holocaust are also haunted by Lyotard's 'murder of the death.' These narratives are preoccupied with the question of whether the Jewish death signifies beyond itself, and indeed whether anyone even knows they are dying. Marek Edelman, survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, relates this fear in an interview with Hanna Krall:

> [Krall] --Was it possible to see anything beyond the wall on the Aryan side?
>
> [Edelman] --Oh yes. The wall only reached the second floor. And already from the third floor one could see the *other* street. We could see a merry-go-round, people, we could hear music, and we were terribly afraid that this music would drown us out and that those people would never notice a thing, that nobody in the world would notice a thing: us, the struggle, the dead.... That this wall was so huge, that nothing, no message about us, would ever make it out. (137)

Edelman's anxiety is compelling: can the world outside the ghetto perceive the Jewish extermination? Initially, it may appear that the fundamental divergence of the Jewish and Polish experiences of occupation belies any possibility that the message "would ever make it out." Certainly the experience of life inside the ghetto is profoundly distinct from that on the outside. As Michael C. Steinlauf notes, "[German] oppression, for most of the war and for most Poles, damaged but did not destroy the fabric of everyday life...but the situation of the Jews under the German occupation bore little resemblance to that of the Poles" (Steinlauf 27, 28). Jews were clearly singled out by the Nazis for extermination in a way that Poles were not. Nevertheless, "[p]ublicly at least, Polish memory of the war years has been preoccupied with issues of Polish survival, martyrdom, and resistance" (Steinlauf x). By the end of the war, Poland's devastation was unequalled throughout occupied Europe. Steinlauf identifies both the breach between Polish and Jewish experiences and the extent of Polish suffering:

> [A]bout two million Poles and three million Polish Jews died during the German occupation of Poland; these figures represent nearly 10 percent of the ethnically Polish population but almost 90 percent of the Jewish population of prewar Poland. Nevertheless, nowhere else in Europe would such a comparison even begin to be necessary; nowhere else, that is, did the murder of Jews unfold amidst such slaughter of the coterritorial people. (28)

Although the horror of the Jewish death may impel a sympathetic desire to disregard coterritorial narratives, such oversight does not advance understanding

of the Holocaust. As Jan Gross, author of *Neighbors* observes, Polish and Jewish narratives are inextricably connected:

> [S]tandard historiography posits that there are two separate wartime histories – one pertaining to the Jews and the other to all the other citizens of a given European country subjected to Nazi rule. This is a particularly untenable position with respect to Poland....Conventional wisdom maintains that only 'socially marginal' individuals in Polish society....were involved with the Jews....[But] *how can the wiping out of one-third of its urban population be anything other than a central issue of Poland's modern history?* (8, 9)

It is important to note that Gross's argument is not concerned with commensurability; he does not assert an equivalency of Polish and Jewish suffering. Rather, his observations serve as a reminder that the Jewish experience, while unique, did not occur in a vacuum. The Warsaw Ghetto existed in the midst of the city; the metropolis was not evacuated but continued to function around the Jewish quarter. Notwithstanding the wall, there was physical transaction between the ghetto and the external world. Goods and even people passed both openly and covertly through the wall, although for Jews such attempts were frequently lethal. Additionally, a footbridge linked two sections of the Warsaw Ghetto, arching over a street that remained outside the walls. On this block of Chłodna Street Polish Gentiles could look up and see Warsaw's Jews passing above them. This transaction also takes narrative form; both

Polish and Jewish texts of the German occupation engage passionately with the heroic narrative. Thus the ghetto is a remarkable instance of utter singularity unfolding in the midst of a sea of witnesses. Despite Edelman's fears, the noise of the revolt was heard over the merry-go-round.[4] From inside and outside the wall, then, what happens when the heroic narrative encounters the Warsaw Ghetto? What is revealed when Polish and Jewish texts consider the ghetto through the lens of the heroic genre? Certainly the result is an uneasy and at times painful image. In this thesis, four texts, two Jewish and two Polish ones, grapple with the Warsaw Ghetto and with the question of whether the heroic narrative can survive within its walls.

Even when the heroic narrative and the accompanying beautiful death are passionately invoked, in these texts they are not necessarily endorsed. Edelman vigorously rejects the implications of the heroic narrative. In both *The Ghetto Fights* (1945), Edelman's account of the Ghetto Uprising and *To Outwit God* (1977), his conversation with Hanna Krall, Edelman refuses the heroic narrative's central notion of the beautiful death. He is unwilling to accept the implications of the heroic narrative for those who did not participate in armed resistance. Simultaneously, however, Edelman is deeply committed to the notion that resistance is honourable. His engagement with the heroic narrative is one of aggressive deconstruction, but even in this negative sense, the genre preoccupies Edelman. This thesis will pay close attention to the differences between Edelman's view of the heroic narrative in each of these two texts. In

[4] Indeed, as Jan Błoński notes in his highly influential essay "A Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto," examination of Poland's role in the Holocaust is an ethical imperative. To entirely separate the

The Ghetto Fights, Edelman narrates but does not interpret heroism, while in *To Outwit God* he actively instructs the reader as to the failure of the heroic narrative to represent the Warsaw Ghetto. Krall's role as mediator of the survivor's testimony and as reader-substitute will also be considered.

Jan Nowak is a Pole who served as a courier for the extensive Polish underground state. In *Courier from Warsaw* (1982), he describes these experiences and places them firmly within the context of the Polish heroic narrative. In doing so he emphasises Poland's suffering and valour under German occupation. Nowak's interpretation of the heroic narrative is straightforward, but its implications are significant, particularly for Jews. This section will consider the critical influence of the Polish heroic narrative on Nowak's account, as well as the contradictions between this chronicle and the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust. *Courier from Warsaw* exemplifies the process by which a national narrative that relies heavily on notions of heroism contends with the victimisation of its Jewish citizens. Like Jan Nowak, Jan Karski was an underground courier during the German occupation of Poland. In *Story of a Secret State* (1944), he recounts his illicit visits to the Warsaw Ghetto and his subsequent testimony about these experiences to Allied leaders. Unlike Nowak's text, Karski's account does not invoke a framework of nationalism and adventure, but instead converts the heroic narrative into a heroic witness. In doing so he privileges the act of testimony and endows it with great significance. But when bearing witness fails to spur Allied intervention in the destruction of the Jews, Karski's notion of heroic testimony falters. The courier's account, that of a

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two experiences is to deny Polish involvement in the extermination.

sympathetic but nevertheless external witness, frames a discussion of the nature and limitations of testimony.

Despite the similarities of nationality and genre, the profound differences between, and indeed within, these narratives belie facile comparison. As such, this thesis is guided by Lyotard's notion of the wrong: "A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse" (xi). As Lyotard notes, the imposition of one homogeneous discourse on various cultures is totalitarian. Thus this thesis does not seek to export the standards of one occupation narrative onto the other. Indeed, it is possible that the Polish and Jewish narratives are in significant ways incommensurate. I am mindful that the gap between the narratives may constitute Lyotard's "differend", "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments" (xi).

Rather than attempting to impose resolution on such a conflict, this thesis examines how Edelman, Krall, Nowak and Karski each use the heroic narrative in a struggle to discern the meaning of mass suffering. This narrative is itself a genre that imposes order. As Gibson notes, the heroic narrative is "a genre that promised social as well as poetic coherence, one that promised to implicate itself in – if only by constructing it – some common ground of belief" (202). Given the differences between the four accounts, it is inevitable that the process of interpretation produces vastly different conclusions. Edelman uses the heroic narrative as a negative example against which to insist upon the equality of the

passive and active deaths. In her interview with Edelman, Krall mediates the survivor's testimony and thus heavily shapes the rejection of the heroic narrative that emerges so powerfully in *To Outwit God*. For Nowak, the heroic narrative asserts Poland's national destiny and in doing so allows the Holocaust to be subsumed into the wider chronicle of Polish suffering. Karski uses the genre to affirm the importance of bearing witness, and in this way asserts that the witness's meaning does not fail in the face of the ghetto.

Finally, a few words from the ghetto itself are no doubt the best introduction for this thesis. Adam Czerniakow, the chairman of the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish Council, committed suicide on the first day of the mass deportations from ghetto to death camp. His diary contains a heartrending fragment that reads simply, "The idea of the ghetto" (160). It is "the idea of the ghetto" that this paper considers; from both Jewish and Polish perspectives, what does heroism mean inside such an "idea"?

Chapter 2

Marek Edelman and the Heroic Narrative

I am writing this while this murderous war is still going on and the fate of the remaining European Jews is still unknown.

Emmanuel Ringelblum

Marek Edelman is the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He was a commander in the ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organisation), an amalgam of various political groups that came together in response to the deportations of summer 1942. Formed in the ghetto, its purpose was "to prepare armed resistance for the time when the Germans might attempt to repeat the extermination procedure in the Warsaw Ghetto" (Edelman 68). This "extermination procedure" that inspired the creation of the ZOB involved unprecedented levels of destruction. Between July and September 1942, 6,000 to 10,000 Jews were taken from the Warsaw Ghetto every day. Sacrifice, luck and money could buy time, but rarely secured a Jew's survival for very long. Those who were able to escape the Umschlagplatz, the public square from which the trains departed Warsaw, almost always returned: "Those who were rescued, however, a comparatively insignificant number, usually showed up at the *Umschlag* for a second and third time, and finally disappeared into the fatal interior of a railroad car with the rest of the victims" (Edelman 62). The trains left the square and proceeded directly to Treblinka. As Raul Hilberg reports, "When

the *Aktion* was over, the population of the Warsaw ghetto had been reduced from 380,000 to 70,000; a total of 310,322 had been deported" (320). The narrative details of what happened after deportation, known in part in the ghetto, can now be filled in. Franz Suchomel, an SS officer at Treblinka, reports the impact of the Great Action on the death camp: "More people kept coming, always more, whom we hadn't the facilities to kill. The brass was in a rush to clean out the Warsaw ghetto. The gas chambers couldn't handle the load" (Lanzmann 55).

Following the 1942 deportations, the ZOB was formed and organised armed resistance began in the Warsaw Ghetto. This resistance culminated in the April 1943 ghetto uprising. Edelman participated in the uprising and, unlike most of his compatriots, outlived both the Warsaw Ghetto and the Third Reich. In 1945 he published *The Ghetto Fights*, a first-person account of the seven-week revolt. Thirty years later, journalist Hanna Krall interviewed Edelman about the uprising and his subsequent experiences as a heart surgeon in his native Poland. Krall published the proceedings of her conversations with Edelman, and her own reflections on their dialogue, in a 1977 volume entitled *To Outwit God.* [5]

Partly due to these two texts, Edelman became well known, particularly throughout Poland and the Jewish Diaspora. He is, by most accounts that are not historically revisionist, a hero. Perhaps more strikingly, he is a hero who survived the war. Many chronicles of his experience emphasise that he is "the

[5] Krall also produced a dramatic version of her interview with Edelman, which was a great success on stage in Poland and Germany. The text of this play was published in English as Shielding the Flame.

last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising."[6] This emphasis on his uniqueness is part of the heroic narrative that surrounds Edelman. Many of the best known biographical accounts of the Warsaw Ghetto, such as those written by Adam Czerniakow, Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Ringelblum and Janusz Korczak, were published posthumously. Their authors did not survive the war. Edelman, however, is ghetto heroism extant. This status makes his accounts especially interesting. *The Ghetto Fights* and *To Outwit God* struggle with the limits of the heroic narrative even as their author is lauded as a heroic survivor. Edelman resists the very narrative in which he himself is immersed. Thus these texts provide a glimpse of the subject of the heroic narrative challenging the genre that defines him. For Edelman, this challenge is not an act of false modesty; his resistance is not based on the claim that he is unworthy to be designated a hero. In this sense Edelman's objections are not personal. Rather, they are epistemological and generic. He objects to what the heroic narrative suggests about the meaning of heroism, and to the genre's ability to adequately contain the experiences of the Warsaw Ghetto. In doing so, Edelman engages in a complex struggle with the heroic narrative that has so defined him in the public consciousness. Additionally, these texts provide other neat bases for comparison. Edelman's views on the heroic narrative are laid out both immediately after the war and three decades later. Edelman himself authors the first text, while the second account reaches the reader through the mediation of

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[6] See Michael C. Steinlauf's *Bondage to the Dead*, p. 107, the back cover of *To Outwit God* and indeed this paper.

Hanna Krall. Read in tandem, then, these two volumes offer a remarkable commentary on heroism in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Both texts engage with heroism and struggle with the limitations of the heroic narrative. However, in *The Ghetto Fights* Edelman narrates but does not interpret heroism. He relates acts of great courage, but does not overtly ascribe meaning to these events. In contrast, Krall's text takes an aggressive stand on the meaning of heroism in the ghetto. By doing so *To Outwit God* actively deconstructs the heroic narrative that *The Ghetto Fights* deigns to participate in. An examination of Edelman's initial account of the ghetto uprising will set the stage for the discussion of Krall's text. Both *The Ghetto Fights* and *To Outwit God* will be considered within the context of the heroic narrative and its limitation by the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto.

***The Ghetto Fights* and the refusal to interpret heroism**

Despite the heroic status accorded its author, *The Ghetto Fights* often resists the tropes of the heroic narrative. Unlike *To Outwit God*, Edelman's text does not overtly speak its rejection of the heroic genre. Instead, it *demonstrates* the narrative's failure to accurately represent heroism in the ghetto, even as it describes acts of great valour. This resistance to the heroic narrative is evident in the text's insistence that factors other than heroism are determinative of the Uprising's success. Edelman implies that the insurgents survive as long as they do through a patchwork made of chance, luck, miracle, skill, and heroism. The latter is no more notable than the former. In one incident, two resistance fighters

attempt to prevent a pair of German soldiers from entering a building in the brushmakers' area, a region consisting of Franciszkanska, Swietojerska and Bonifraterska Streets. They throw hand grenades at the advancing enemy, but fail to stop them:

> After a while the supply of grenades becomes exhausted, while two Germans are still moving about the courtyard below. Szlamek reaches for an incendiary bottle and throws it at the German so accurately that the latter, hit squarely over his helmet, instantly catches fire and is burned to death. (79)

The vignette ends here. Edelman moves on to the next glimpse of the Uprising without comment on Szlamek's actions. There is no mention of the Jews' bravery, or unusual skill in marksmanship. Indeed, the scene eschews assessment in favour of description. A similar reticence occurs several lines later when Edelman relates the escape of five battle groups from the brushmakers' area. Fleeing fires set by the Nazis, the insurgents attempt to reach the Central Ghetto. This journey requires passage through a heavily guarded hole in the ghetto wall. After three groups successfully pass through, a fourth attempts escape:

> When the first of this group emerge on the street, a German searchlight illuminates the entire wall section. It seems as if not a single person more will be able to save his life here. Suddenly Romanowicz's single well-aimed round puts out the searchlight

> and, before the Germans have time to collect their wits, our entire group manages to cross over to the other side. (80)

Here again the resistance fighters are saved not by clever planning, but seemingly by chance. Similarly, Edelman notes that the ghetto fighters who survive gassing in the Mila Street bunker "miraculously escaped death" (84). Like the fourth battle group passing through the Wall, the bunker escapees' endurance is not attributed to heroic action. Edelman emphasises practicalities in his explanation of why the insurgents succeed. The fourth battle group, for instance, survives because of "a single well-aimed round" and the ensuing confusion. But Edelman does not indicate what these victories mean. There is no suggestion that survival means the resistance fighters' cause is righteous, or their fighters are endowed with extraordinary zeal, or even that the enemy is ill prepared. Such extrapolation is strikingly absent. Notably, signification in these scenes does not extend beyond the immediate event. The successes of Romanowicz and Szlamek do not signify the survival of Polish Jewry, the ghetto, or the resistance fighters. Instead, they signify the escape of the fourth battle group and the death of a German soldier.

This terse structure has significant implications for the meaning of resistance. Most importantly, it suggests that in the Warsaw Ghetto successful armed resistance has no power to signify meaning beyond itself; it cannot indicate ultimate victory.[7] And even within the Ghetto, the text's narrative

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[7] This is of course not to suggest that the Uprising is meaningless. Rather, it is to assert that in *The Ghetto Fights*, the meaning of resistance does not extend beyond the act of resistance itself. It does not constitute a promise of victory, or a reduction in the ultimate number of dead. It does not signify beyond that particular moment in that particular place.

structure suggests that such meaning is limited. *The Ghetto Fights* both endorses and questions the signifying power of armed resistance. This uneasiness is manifest as Edelman describes the early victories of the ghetto fighters:

> Once again the Germans withdrew from the Ghetto. Once again the partisans' victory was complete. It was their second victory.
>
> The Germans tried again. They attempted to enter the Ghetto at several other points, and everywhere they encountered determined opposition. Every house was a fortress.
>
> * * *
>
> In one of the attics we are suddenly surrounded. (77)

The narrative shift here is abrupt and revealing. The text moves from an unequivocal statement of fact, "Every house was a fortress," to an immediate contradiction of that fact, "In one of the attics we are suddenly surrounded." As soon as it is established, the fortress's boundary is breached both narratively and physically. The text's assertion that victory is complete is allowed to stand for only a breath of time. The space between the two passages thus becomes both mysterious and violent. What happens to the narrative and to signification in this starred pause? In this liminal space armed resistance collides with the heroic narrative's limited ability to express that resistance. This limitation is defined by the exact confines of the ghetto. The first lines of the passage are typical of a heroic narrative; they speak forcefully and without ambiguity. This is the language of victory. But victory itself is both temporally and epistemologically

unsteady in the Warsaw Ghetto. "[T]he partisans' victory" does not appear to have made any material difference. It is martial success of this kind, followed quickly by defeat, that the heroic narrative cannot represent. And rather than interpreting this narrative limitation, Edelman simply displays it. The starred pause acknowledges the limitation of the heroic narrative, and it is in this space that the genre fails. Heroic narrative cannot tell the entire story of the Warsaw Ghetto; in the space between victory and defeat the genre encounters the ghetto wall. The narrative form cannot contain this context. Having encountered such limitation, *The Ghetto Fights* displays the genre's failure through the starred pause, but offers no narrative interpretation. Here again, Edelman allows the text to speak for itself.

The Silence of Heroism in *The Ghetto Fights*

The most obvious exclusion of the heroic narrative in this text occurs in the realm of the semantic. The traditional vocabulary of heroism is noticeably absent. Those whose actions must be considered courageous are rarely described as such. One notable example of this is Edelman's factual description of a self-sacrificing act by Dawid Hochberg:

> When the Germans approached a bunker where five battle groups and several hundred civilians were sheltered and their deaths seemed inevitable, David relinquished his weapons and blocked the narrow passageway with his own body. In this position he was killed by the Germans, but before his wedged-in body could be

> removed, the entire civilian group as well as the partisans had time to leave the endangered shelter. (87)

Here Edelman provides no commentary, only unadorned reportage. Hochberg's actions must speak for themselves. Like much of the text, this passage excludes words such as "heroic," "brave," "courageous," "valiant," "dauntless," "sacrifice" and "martyr." The text seems loath to speak heroism, even as it consistently narrates acts of valour. Edelman's work demonstrates rather than declares; events are reported but not analysed. What then is the effect of this reticence? Why might the text be left to 'speak for itself'?

One explanation is of course that meaning is assumed to be stable: interpretation is unnecessary because every reader will understand the meaning of Dawid Hochberg's act. Similarly, no explanation is offered for the death of the German soldier because its meaning is clear: Szlamek kills a German soldier. The act occurs in a context where its meaning cannot be contested, so there is no need for explanation. But as the conflict contained in the starred pause indicates, the Warsaw Ghetto is not such a stable context. A more likely explanation is that the lack of commentary implies a flaw or weakness in the available terms of analysis. Hochberg is clearly a martyr, but how/what does martyrdom mean in the context of the Warsaw Ghetto? It is perhaps not the act but meaning itself that fails, that cannot encompass the event. It is the enormity of the circumstances of destruction that fracture meaning. Heroism itself is inadequate to the act it attempts to describe. It cannot be made to fit the circumstances. This is not because the act itself is not noble, but because of the

context in which it occurs. Dawid Hochberg's sacrifice is, after all, not the end of the story. He could only save lives temporarily. Similarly, those who were saved by Romanowicz and Szlamek's aim likely did not survive the war. Edelman reflects on the fate of the insurgents after the destruction of the Ghetto:

> Two battle groups remained in the Ghetto. We were in contact with them until the middle of June. From then on every trace of them disappeared.
>
> Those who had gone over to the 'Aryan side' continued the partisan fight in the woods. The majority perished eventually. (85)

What then is the value of heroism? In the Ghetto Uprising it is a stop-gap measure against the surety of death. This may be why Edelman leaves heroism to speak for itself. In such circumstances, how loudly dare heroism speak its accomplishments if it ultimately fails to impact the death ledger? The enormity of the destruction is staggering. As Hilberg notes, the Jewish community in Poland numbered 3,350,000 in 1939, but by 1945 only 50,000 Polish Jews remained alive (670). In the face of such destruction, the insurgents' acts stand, but are not the final word. The conclusion of *The Ghetto Fights* reflects this tragic uneasiness with the meaning of heroism. The text does not end with victory. Its final pages do not recount the eventual German defeat, but the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. As the text was published in 1945, it could have included a report of the Nazi downfall. But this coda is absent. Edelman's story ends on 10 May 1943, with an injunction to remember the dead: "We, who did not perish, leave it up to you to keep the memory of them alive – forever" (87). Thus the end

of Edelman's narrative is the end of the Warsaw Ghetto. Edelman refuses to extend the narrative past the destruction of the ghetto and its inhabitants. Any such extension might represent redemption of the hundreds of thousands of dead. To invoke the eventual defeat of the Germans is to mask the wretched extent of their success. The destruction of Poland's Jews was accomplished quickly; the Ghetto was liquidated in 1943. Much of the ghetto was razed to the ground by the time the Russians reached Warsaw and preparations had begun for the area to be converted into a park. The ghetto was by this point unnecessary, as the extermination of Polish Jewry was mostly complete. By ending his account with an injunction to remember rather than a celebration of victory, Edelman foregrounds this staggering destruction. These deaths are the end of his narrative, and the ghetto's heroism stands humbled by the context in which it occurred.

Despite this context, Edelman does acknowledge that heroism of several individuals in the final pages of *The Ghetto Fights*. Typically, however, even this gesture is noticeably lacking in heroic commentary. Edelman introduces the section on individual insurgents with these words: "I should like to mention a few of our comrades, although there were many like them, simply because I came in contact with those particular ones in our daily work" (85). This passage implies that Edelman is loath to violate what may be called an ethic of egalitarianism. The author further emphasises equality when he notes of the diverse political factions that make up the ZOB, "We were all fighters for the same just cause, equal in the face of history and death. Every drop of blood was of precisely the

same value" (85). Here Edelman asserts the importance of the individual without establishing hierarchy. In *The Ghetto Fights*, individuation is not based on rank. Heroism, however remarkable, is not employed as a yardstick of worth. But this interest in equality does not render the figures in his text faceless or nameless. Indeed, the work is deeply concerned with particularity. The uprising is presented not in epic but in human terms, as individual resistance fighters are repeatedly invoked. And as in the battle in the brushmakers' area, a single weapon launched by a single person often saves multiple lives. Thus Edelman emphasises the centrality of the individual while resisting a hierarchy of heroism. Abrasha Blum, on whom Edelman heaps the most praise, and to whom he dedicates *The Ghetto Fights*, is a useful example of this simultaneous individuation and assimilation:

> He was the ideological father of armed resistance in our party. Physically very weak, but of exceptional force of conviction and strength of character, he was always the one to decide about our most momentous moves....He did not permit the flame of zeal and work to die out. (85)

Here Blum's achievements are described with more commentary than those of any other figure in the text. But even this praise is carefully placed within an egalitarian context. Blum's leadership and Hochberg's heroism do not raise them above other resistance fighters. In this way Edelman posits no hierarchy, and instead asserts a rough levelling of dead and living ghetto fighters. The absence of heroic commentary contributes to this equality of valour.

Honour: Edelman's conflict between dignity and heroism

It is important to note that while Edelman resists notions of heroism, he frequently invokes the concept of honour. The importance of dignity to Edelman is particularly evident in his attitude towards armed resistance: "[O]ne thing can surely be stated about this particular battle: we did not let the Germans carry out their plans. They did not evacuate a single living person" (83). Significantly, Edelman does not measure the success of armed resistance by the number of lives such action saves. Instead, it is the fact that resistance occurs at all that matters. Such a standard is based on dignity rather than heroics, as Edelman suggests in his description of a 1941 meeting to discuss reports of mass slaughter at Chełmno:

> All of us agreed to offer resistance before being led to death. We were ashamed of the Chełmno Jews' submissiveness, of their failure to rise in their own defence. We did not want the Warsaw Ghetto ever to act in a similar way. 'We shall not die on our knees,' said Abramek. 'Not they will be an example for us.' (43)

For Edelman, resistance is not about heroism or survival. Abramek does not declare, "We shall not die," but "We shall not die on our knees." The Chełmno Jews' submissiveness is shameful, Edelman says, and conversely, to resist is honourable. In *The Ghetto Fights*, then, armed resistance promises not survival but honour.

The conflict between Edelman's rejection of the heroic narrative and his embrace of dignity is encapsulated in one brief passage. In these two lines

Edelman describes the mood in the ghetto in November 1942, after the summer deportations: "By now the Jews finally began to realise that deportation actually meant death; that there was no other alternative except to die honourably. But as was quite natural for human beings, they still tried to postpone death and 'honour' for as long a time as possible" (69). These two sentences reveal the conflict between notions of heroism and honour. In the first sentence Edelman describes the honourable death soberly; "to die honourably" is not treated ironically here. Within the tragically restricted circumstances of the ghetto, Edelman identifies the honourable death as a serious and ethical task. It is essential to note that it is context that makes this so; if deportation did not mean death then "to die honourably" would not be the only dignified choice available to Jews. It is the constriction of the ghetto walls that makes honourable death the only remaining choice: "[T]here was no other alternative except to die honourably" (69). The realisation that deportation means slaughter is closely followed by the imperative of the dignified death. In *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, Emmanuel Ringelblum also indicates that after the deportations of summer 1942, knowledge quickly led to a desire for dignity. But Ringelblum's narrative is expressed remarkably differently than is Edelman's. The Warsaw Ghetto diarist and founder of the Oneg Shabbat archives notes,

> As soon as the round-ups stopped in September 1942 and numerous reports started arriving from eye witnesses of the mass slaughter in Treblinka, a terrible awakening took place....Our fate is sealed, people were saying. Every Jew carries a death sentence in

> his pocket, handed him by the greatest murderer of all time. Thus we must think not so much of saving our lives, which seems to be a very problematic affair, but rather of dying an honourable death, dying with weapons in our hands. (Ringelblum 164, 165)

Both Ringelblum and Edelman agree that the pledge to die honourably quickly follows the realisation that death is inevitable. But semantic differences reveal deeper rifts between the two apparently similar accounts. While both describe a communal rather than an individual experience, Edelman uses the third person voice here. He writes of "the Jews" and describes how "they" attempt to stall death. Initially Ringelblum uses much the same language. He recounts conversation in the street, and the general mood of the ghetto through such phrases as "people were saying." But the author himself is quickly subsumed into the population he describes. Ringelblum's language slips into the inclusive as he writes of "[e]very Jew," and relates how "we" and "us" plan to die. Syntactically Ringelblum participates in the communal process of realisation and resolve. This participation is echoed in the narrative structure of the passage. Significantly, it is clear from *Polish-Jewish Relations* that like Edelman, Ringelblum recognised the truth before the majority of the population. Thus he did not actually experience the revelation at the same time as the wider ghetto community. But despite this temporal gap, the archivist shares narratively in the awakening consciousness of the ghetto. As the Jews in the street realise the coming destruction, Ringelblum's "we" and "us" joins him to the common experience. He shares in both the knowledge and the ensuing vow to die with

dignity. Narratively and semantically, Ringelblum identifies himself with the communal experience.

Like Ringelblum, Edelman frequently uses pronouns and verb tenses that ally him with the ghetto population. He includes himself particularly often in reports of the ZOB's activities, such as when he notes, "We enlarged our battle organisation," and "Of our comrades we then lost Goldberg (the barber) and his wife" (50, 51). But this communal identification is less evident in Edelman's description of the ghetto's realisation of their fate. He does not narrate his own awakening to knowledge, but that of his fellow Jews. This separation is notable, and stands in interesting contrast to Ringelblum's identification with the masses during this significant moment. The difference between the two men may be that of survival. Edelman writes his account after the war; it is published in 1945 by a living author. Ringelblum writes in 1943 and 1944, while hiding in a bunker in Aryan Warsaw. He is discovered by the Gestapo and executed in March 1944. *Polish-Jewish Relations* is published posthumously. Thus it may be that Edelman's separation from his fellow Jews occurs not at the moment of realisation, but at the moment he outlives virtually all of those he describes. Edelman's survival may in this way account for his use here of the voice of an omnipotent narrator rather than a member of the general population.

The second sentence of Edelman's remarks on the honourable death is equally revealing. In this line Edelman treats honour more sceptically. It no longer stands without qualification, as indicated by its enclosure in quotation marks. This enclosure questions the stability of honour; its meaning is no longer

assumed to be straightforward. Diepeveen analyses the use of quotation marks in discussions of modernism:

> The single-word quotation suggests that the quoting writer is apologizing for the sloppiness of the term, and that he would use a clearer term but for the term's typical user, and the general public, who are most familiar with and habitually use the messy forms. The quotations marks suggest that the people who typically use this term, although they are responsible for its wide circulation, do not think clearly about it. Careful thought, by contrast, recognizes the problematic nature of the term. (46)

Although Diepeveen suggests that the instability suggested by quotation marks is primarily contained in the reader, Edelman's remarks may also reveal uneasiness on the part of the author. In this passage Edelman himself, as both an analyst and subject of the heroic narrative, may be indicating his own anxiety over the stability of honour. Interestingly, despite this instability, Edelman's earlier unqualified assertion is not erased. His sincere advocacy of the honourable death is not edited out of the text. The assertion that "there was no other alternative except to die honourably" remains part of the narrative, but is followed by a qualification. This coupling allows an unresolved tension to stand. Rather than attempting to contain it, Edelman acknowledges the painful irony of an honour that exists only in death. Death offers the only chance, within the impossibly constricted world of the ghetto, for dignity. What is the value of such dignity, the enclosed 'honour' seems to ask. It cannot exist without qualification

when its occasion is the organised murder of an entire people. Thus this pairing of honour and slaughter is unbearable. What is the value of a dignity that exists only in death? This is the unresolved tension that haunts *The Ghetto Fights*. Is the story of the Warsaw Ghetto one of extermination or one of heroic resistance? As *Schindler's List* famously claims on the basis of Talmudic authority, does one life contain the world entire? Which speaks more loudly, and which is the definitive narrative: the millions dead or the small acts of heroism? The heroic narrative cannot contain this conflict. It falters if the story it recounts is not that of life, or of redemptive sacrifice. The genre cannot contain senseless, successful destruction. Edelman's narrative shines light on this failing even as he deeply values honour. This tension between dignity and the failure of the heroic remains unresolved in *The Ghetto Fights*, only to re-emerge much more overtly in *To Outwit God*.

To Outwit God: **Doubting Heroism**

To Outwit God deals with many of the same issues that emerge in *The Ghetto Fights*. But this text is explicitly concerned with deconstructing the heroic narrative. In order to do so, Krall and Edelman assert that such a narrative exists; they reference a community of people who believe in and perpetuate the heroic interpretation of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Ironically, then, *To Outwit God* must proclaim the enduring influence of the heroic narrative in order to deconstruct it. This task begins only a few pages into the text. Edelman describes the significance of an early gunfight with German soldiers:

> We shot at them...By the way, we missed, but it doesn't matter.
>
> --How come it doesn't matter?
>
> --The important thing was just that we were shooting. We had to show it. Not to the Germans. They knew better than us how to shoot. We had to show it to this other, the non-German world. People have always thought that shooting is the highest form of heroism. So we were shooting. (133)

Here Edelman claims that "people have always" supported the heroic narrative, even as he subtly separates himself from the very community he invokes. The passage's descriptive tone divides Edelman from that which he observes. Edelman reports that "people" believe "shooting is the highest form of heroism," but it is not clear what Edelman believes. He relates the beliefs of others, but does not endorse this view himself. This tactic of relating the views of others but not stating his own places Edelman at a remove from the people he describes. This semantic distance re-emerges when Edelman describes the insurgents' decision to engage in armed resistance: "The majority of us favored an uprising. After all, humanity had agreed that dying with arms was more beautiful than without arms" (140). Edelman's invocation of the wider human community is once again strangely detached. He observes and analyses, but is not fully engaged. In the language of the text, he is not included in the categories of "people" or "humanity." Thus, even as it invokes the majority opinion, the text simultaneously registers Edelman's dissent. This is an unusual occurrence at this point in the text. Here Edelman is part of the majority that favours uprising,

although he may not espouse the values that encourage armed resistance. Edelman does not follow "[p]eople have always thought," and "humanity had agreed" with a ringing endorsement of these positions. Instead, his position is unclear. His identity is unstable; he is in favour of uprising but possibly not of the narrative that informs armed resistance. Edelman interprets his own heroism here. He engages in heroic acts by joining armed resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto. But he rejects the narrative that often accompanies these acts. In these two exchanges Edelman's own views remain vague. He describes his own acts of resistance and how the narrative of heroism grants these acts meaning, but he refuses to endorse this position. So the act hangs in mid-air. Edelman narrates it, and the ideology that commonly undergirds it, but he does not openly support this ideology. In doing so Edelman both separates himself from "humanity" and "people" and challenges the narrative of heroism. The acts are not silenced, but neither does Edelman endorse their common interpretation. In this way he breaks from the wider community's understanding of his actions. Significantly, this dissent separates him from the wider human community in ways that recur throughout Krall's text. In these moments, Edelman is both of the community he describes and apart from it.

Mordecai Anielewicz: The deconstruction of a Jewish hero

This rejection of the heroic narrative is made more explicit in the text's treatment of Mordecai Anielewicz, commander of the ZOB in the last days of the Uprising. Nathan Rappaport's monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising sets in

stone the vision of Anielewicz as a hero. He is portrayed as a strong young man, chest bared, arm grasping a weapon as he gazes into the distance. He is injured, as the bandages on his arm and forehead attest, but he endures. As James Young notes, in Rappaport's vision Anielewicz is "classically, even mythologically drawn….[and] heroically sculpted" (172). A more recent cultural representation offers much the same image. *Uprising!*, a 2001 television movie, presents the rebel in a solidly heroic manner.[8] The first time Anielewicz appears on screen in this film he is at home alone, clothed in an undershirt that reveals a well-muscled torso. As he listens to classical music Anielewicz keeps the beat, miming an orchestra conductor, and hums along. This tranquil, solitary and cultured scene is interrupted by the arrival of a Jewish police officer. The officer orders Anielewicz to report for a German work detail. Anielewicz refuses and attacks the constable, pushing him out of the apartment. In this short scene, Anielewicz is in all senses portrayed as a man of action. He is physically strong, he conducts the music rather than simply listening to it, and he assaults an authority figure. There is no ambivalence here; the Commander is a man who

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[8] It should be noted that Rappaport's monument and *Uprising!* can by no means be conflated. Separated by fifty years and differing social, national and political contexts, the two representations participate in distinct strands of the heroic narrative. The monument is marked by Polish, Zionist and Communist interests, all of which locate the uprising within the frame their own heroic narratives. The television movie exists firmly within the 'Hollywood' heroic narrative. It is an American production, and to this extent participates in the recent adoption of the Holocaust as part of the American national narrative. Nevertheless, it is striking that two such disparate representations of Anielewicz employ many of the same elements in support of a heroic narrative, and these similarities are useful to the present discussion.
It is also significant that *Uprising!* caused great controversy in Poland, due to a factual error in the film. *Uprising!* indicates that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising lasted longer than the Warsaw Rising of 1944, a revolt that took place outside the ghetto walls. For the political context of this controversy and the competition between Jewish and Polish narratives of the Holocaust, see Chapter 2.

has no qualms about acting boldly. In contrast with these two heroic depictions, Edelman's description of Anielewicz is markedly average:

> He very much wanted to be a commander, so we chose him. He was a little childlike in this ambition, but he was a talented guy....Before the war he'd lived on Solec Street. His mother sold fish. When she had any left over, she would have him buy red paint and paint the gills so the fish would look fresh....I saw him the day after [after Anielewicz witnessed an action]. He was already a different man. Celina told me: "You know, it happened to him yesterday. He was just sitting and muttering: 'We're all going to die...'" He managed to get roused up only once after that. (134)

This Mordecai Anielewicz differs markedly from the heroic figure of monument and film. As Makolkin notes, "The grammar of a heroic biography requires only praise of the hero, and the biographer forces panegyric upon the inconsistent human life, full of mistakes and regrettable actions" (81). In contrast, *To Outwit God* emphasises Anielewicz's "inconsistent human life." Indeed, it offers an almost gleeful deconstruction of Anielewicz the hero. He is described as lower class, grasping, childlike, perhaps even a huckster. And this Anielewicz is far from unwavering. He is not steadfast to the end; Edelman's Anielewicz despairs and dies a man undone by circumstance. The physical wounds depicted by Rappaport are metaphysically definitive here; Edelman presents Anielewicz as a broken man. This characterisation opposes the spirit of Rappaport's monument, which portrays a man who endures even unto the most desperate end. *To*

Outwit God also denies the timelessness of the heroic; Mordecai is not only taken down from the monument but also placed outside the ghetto walls. The inclusion of details from Anielewicz's life before he was imprisoned in the Ghetto removes him from the historical and temporal contexts that make him 'the Commander.' Taken out of this context, Anielewicz is simply a man.

This revision of Anielewicz does not pass unnoticed. Krall anticipates an outraged response, and incorporates these objections into the text. Many people, she notes, are particularly offended by the story of the painted fish:

> They insist this couldn't be the real Anielewicz, this one with the *peinture rouge*. And there must be some truth to that, since so many people insist on it. They write that one mustn't say such things about the Commander.
>
> --Listen, Hanna, Edelman says, from now on we'll have to be careful. We'll choose our words very carefully.
>
> Of course, we shall. (142-3)

This passage highlights the semantics of the heroic narrative. Krall and Edelman refer to the ZOB leader as 'Anielewicz,' while the 'people" call him 'the Commander.' This use of a title rather than a name is common to the heroic narrative: "In most heroic biographies, the hero is seldom referred to by his first name after he had been named heroically" (Makolkin 86). Here the majority eschews both of Anielewicz's names in favour of his heroic title. The man is thus

renamed as a role. The individual disappears and Mordecai Anielewicz means only as 'the Commander.'

The constructedness of these characterisations should be noted here. Certainly representations such as Rappaport's monument and *Uprising!* indicate the continued existence of 'the Commander's' heroic narrative. But *To Outwit God* is a highly mediated text. Krall's use of dialogue in her discussions with Edelman suggests that the text is a word-by-word transcription of actual conversation. In fact, it may be much less steady. In these passages it appears that Krall only knows as much as Edelman tells her; she has no extraordinary access to his thoughts. But the sections on Edelman's medical career position Krall as an omnipotent narrator:

> This is what Dr. Edelman's patients were thinking about, lying under the Xylocaine drip....If Mr. Rzewuski, like Mrs. Bubner or Mr. Rudny, had been thinking about the best thing in his life, he would doubtlessly have been thinking of a factory that was turned over to him when he was twenty-eight years old....Mr. Rzewuski would certainly have been thinking about all that as he lay under the i.v. drip, if he thought about anything at all. But, as I have said, he was not thinking about anything. (182)

How does Krall know what Edelman's patients were thinking about? The text is vague on this point. The absence of clear evidence to support Krall's truth claims places the text's non-fiction status in jeopardy. Her brash assertion that she knows what Mr. Rzewuski is thinking is not supported by the narrative gestures

that typically bolster such a claim. Krall does not indicate that she spoke with the patients, or looked at their medical records, or in any way unearthed their innermost thoughts. This lack of evidence nudges the text from journalism to fiction.[9] It is of course possible that Krall interviewed the patients and relates their experiences here in a subjective manner that eschews a traditional style of reportage. However, the lack of evidentiary support for this possibility suggests that Krall is speculating. This artistic license has implications beyond the medical aspects of Edelman's story. If Krall speculates in relation to Edelman's patients, then it is certainly possible that she does so in relation to the doctor himself. Indeed, the specific extent of Krall's intervention in the narrative is unclear. Edelman, after all, is only present in *To Outwit God* through Hanna Krall. She is the author of this text, and if the narrative is not simple transcription, then Edelman is, to some degree, a character rather than composer of *To Outwit God*. In this sense Krall wholly mediates Edelman's account of the ghetto uprising. How does the reader know that Marek Edelman said the words Hanna Krall attributes to him? What else did he say that Krall excludes from the text? This is not to suggest that the text is wholly fictional; rather, it is a note of caution.

The other figures in the text, such as Mordecai Anielewicz, are doubly mediated. Anielewicz comes to the reader through the lens of both Edelman and the author who relates Edelman's memories. Similarly, the author paraphrases dissenting opinions, and her attitude towards those who see Anielewicz as 'the

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[9] This blurring of boundaries is furthered by the material form of the text. *To Outwit God* is published in one volume with *The Subtenant*, Krall's fictionalised account of her own wartime experiences. Krall seems to be neither wholly a novelist or a journalist, and the presentation of her work raises questions about whether the texts are fiction or fact.

Commander' is decidedly condescending. Like Edelman, Krall is separate from the masses she observes. She invokes the collective when she writes that "so many people" insist the Commander is not the boy with the red paint. This recalls Edelman's description of "humanity" and "people," and here Krall takes on Edelman's role of external assessor. It is abundantly clear that she is not one of the "so many people" who contest the diminution of 'the Commander' into 'Anielewicz.'

It should also be noted that the conflict between Anielewicz and Edelman is fundamentally political. Edelman is a member of the Bund, the Jewish Polish Socialist party, and Anielewicz is a fervent Zionist. As John Rose notes of the Bund, "In Poland the Bund was the largest Jewish Workers organisation, being both a workers' party and a trade union...The Polish Bund had its origins in the Jewish Workers Bund of Russia, Lithuania and Poland....The Bund was always part of the revolutionary socialist movement in Russia" (115). For the purposes of this discussion, the most important aspect of Edelman's political beliefs is his commitment to altering Polish society while remaining in Poland. Rose notes that the Bund "was uncompromising on the question of the emigration of Polish Jews to Palestine. It repeatedly accused the Zionists of collaboration with the anti-semites on this matter" (115). Edelman believes that Polish Jews should remain in Poland and work with their fellow citizens for social change. He seeks

a Poland that both achieves socialist goals and eradicates anti-semitism.[10] He lives this conviction through his choice to stay in Poland after the German defeat. In later years he plays an active role in the Solidarity movement of the 1980s, and continues his commitment to socialist values, as the edition of *The Ghetto Fights* used in this project indicates. Published by a co-operative socialist organisation, the text's back cover declares, "This fine account of Jewish resistance to the Nazis issues a call for international solidarity against racism and anti-semitism, something the world still needs today." In contrast, Anielewicz did not share Edelman's emphasis on assimilation. He was a Zionist, and thus looked to the possibility of an independent Jewish state rather than to Jewish integration in a socialist Poland. Anielewicz's sense of nationality is based on a Jewish, rather than Polish identity.

These political differences profoundly influence interpretation. Edelman is acutely aware of the ghetto uprising as a part of a larger tradition of socialist resistance. During the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Uprising, Edelman asserts the importance of the revolt for the world outside the ghetto. The Jewish Telegraph Agency reports his remarks:

> The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first time in occupied Europe that civilians put up armed resistance against Nazi occupiers....This was the first brick yanked out of the wall of Nazism in Poland. After our struggle, there were rebellions in the Treblinka and Sobibor

[10] This commitment to both Poland and Judaism is evident in Edelman's double resistance to the German occupation. After the Ghetto Uprising and the destruction of the ghetto, Edelman joined the Polish resistance and fought in the Warsaw Rising of 1944.

> extermination camps, in the ghettos of Bialystok and Czestochowa. We shook the conscience of the Polish underground army and international opinion. We started a process that later led to formulation of the idea of the fight for human dignity and rights included in the U.N. Charter.

Clearly Edelman regards the uprising's significance in international terms. He does not mention a specifically Jewish audience, and privileges political common ground over cultural or religious similarities. But Anielewicz defines the ghetto uprising remarkably differently. In his last letter Anielewicz offers his interpretation of the uprising's significance:

> With the aid of our transmitter we heard the marvelous report on our fighting by the 'Shavit' radio station. The fact that we are remembered beyond the ghetto walls encourages us in our struggle....The dream of my life has risen to become fact. Self-defense in the ghetto will have been a reality. Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men in battle. (Anielewicz)

Here Anielewicz constructs victory in explicitly Jewish terms. His final letter is a declaration of national Jewish pride. And unlike Edelman, Anielewicz invokes heroism in a sincere, uncomplicated manner. His narrative of the uprising is heroic because it results in national Jewish pride. However, both men seem to be applying a twentieth-century version of the heroic narrative to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Lutwack describes the post-war heroic narrative:

> The scarred hero emerges from an abject community and has only moderate chances of doing something noble. His glory is to be found, not especially in the cause of this or that reform or amelioration, but in the discovery of new life for both community and self; and his deeds, although they do not bring about actual delivery, are symbolical gestures of man's efforts to move in the direction of his yearning. (155)

Although Edelman and Anielewicz define "community' differently, they both reach for this version of the heroic narrative; although notably, Edelman only does so after sixty years. And the two men do share the conviction that resistance is honourable, regardless of its impact.

While these profound political differences help elucidate Edelman's interest in Anielewicz, they do not fully explain the matter. *To Outwit God*'s close attention to the unheroic aspects of Mordecai Anielewicz's life raises the question of why Krall and Edelman insist upon the deconstruction of this heroic narrative. What is at stake in the heroic representation of one man? As Krall imagines the majority wondering, "Well – can one still take him seriously, this Anielewicz who puts *peinture rouge* on gills (*les ouïes*); is he still Anielewicz?" (142). And if he is not "still Anielewicz," then what else has shifted? The deconstruction of the Commander myth has implications beyond Anielewicz alone. *Uprising!* and Rappaport's monument posit an Anielewicz who assaults a Jewish police officer and survives. His musculature is intact and he appears not to have suffered the effects of starvation. Perhaps even more notably, he seems unafraid of those

who control the ghetto. These representations of Anielewicz portray a man unaffected by circumstance. Neither the material nor the psychological conditions of the ghetto seem to impact him. In the heroic narrative, the Commander transcends circumstance and is able to act; he is not constrained. This characterisation of Anielewicz in turn characterises the Ghetto; it is represented as a place where such actions are possible. Thus the representation of the Commander/ Anielewicz at least partly determines the ghetto. It raises the question of what was possible inside the walls.

Depictions of the ghetto raise the inevitable question of agency. Why, if action inside the walls is as tantalisingly easy as the Commander narrative implies, did the Jews not act sooner? *To Outwit God* alters the representation of Anielewicz in order to problematize the issue of agency. Edelman and Krall re-size Anielewicz to fit within the confines of the ghetto walls. Edelman says of Mordecai, "He had a lot of youthful verve and enthusiasm…[H]e maintained some kind of a childlike hope" (134, 135). And of his desire to be Commander, Edelman notes, "he was a little childlike in this ambition" (134). Perhaps the most damning testimony Edelman offers against the Commander is his description of what happened after Anielewicz killed a German guard on Mila Street: "[T]he same day in the afternoon the Germans came and as revenge pulled every single person from the block of Zamenhofa between Mila Street and Muranowski Square, several hundred of them. We were furious at him. We even wanted to…Well, it doesn't matter" (192). Here Anielewicz is literally made small and the ghetto by extension becomes a place of diminished possibility. He

is capable of killing one German guard; the Germans kill the inhabitants of an entire city block. Edelman denies Anielewicz the monumental proportions assigned him by Rappaport. He is granted no more than the stature of one Jewish man in a ghetto controlled by Nazis.

The Arithmetic of Destruction: Edelman's Valuation of Death

Significantly, although the text diminishes Anielewicz, it does not erase him. His agency is restricted but not wholly denied. Likewise, *To Outwit God* does not argue that heroism is impossible in the ghetto, or even that Anielewicz himself is not heroic. Indeed, such an argument would be absurd. Edelman took up arms against the Nazis and survived; he is living proof of the possibility of resistance. Rather, the text engages in an argument about what heroism means and how this meaning can be understood within the context of the Holocaust. The struggle to interpret the Shoah is of course not limited to Edelman and Krall. Critical theory also grapples with these issues, and the concerns of narrative and theory are paralleled. Saul Friedländer asserts that the initial public attempts to ascribe meaning to the Holocaust have failed to remain useful. He characterises the early interpretive responses to the destruction as "Catastrophe and Redemption", and "Catastrophe and Heroism" (277). The Catastrophe and Heroism model locates meaning in the Shoah by lauding the ghetto fighters and focusing on their acts of resistance. By extension, this framework criticises those who died 'like sheep to the slaughter' (277). The Catastrophe and Redemption strategy "reinserted the Shoah in the historical sequence of Jewish catastrophes

leading to the redemptive birth of a Jewish state. It was because of the death of the six million, according to Rabbi Nurock, the head of the committee, that 'we have been privileged to have our state'" (277). Friedländer notes that both of these interpretive strategies eventually dissolved, despite increasing public interest in the Shoah: "[T]he more time passed since the extermination of the Jews of Europe, the less compelling the initial interpretive frameworks became....In my opinion, no relevant frameworks of meaning appeared in their stead" (278).[11]

To Outwit God may be read as a detailed rejection of the 'Catastrophe and Heroism' framework. At times this rejection is brutal and explicit, as Edelman relentlessly lays bare the implications of this interpretive strategy. The text will not abide these implications, particularly as they relate to the dead. This insistence becomes clear as Krall and Edelman argue about the relative value of death in the ghetto. Krall writes,

> He screams that I probably consider the people who were surging into the train cars to have been worse than the ones who were shooting. Of course, I do, absolutely, everybody does....But [Edelman] tried to explain....how to die in a gas chamber is by no means worse than to die in battle, and that the only undignified

[11] To offer two observations about the limits of Friedländer's claims: It is important to note that he speaks here exclusively of a widely shared public interpretation of the Shoah. He accepts that the destruction has ongoing and profound meaning for individuals, and argues simply that there does not exist a "compelling framework of meaning as far as public consciousness is concerned" (277). Secondly, although Friedländer writes here specifically of the Israeli consciousness, he also notes that the American experience is similarly lacking in contemporary, meaningful interpretive frameworks for the Shoah.

death is when one attempts to survive at the expense of someone else. (166)

Here Krall provokes Edelman by voicing the opinion of the majority, and endorsing Friedländer's Catastrophe and Heroism framework. It is unclear whether this is simply a device to draw Edelman out, or whether Krall speaks what she believes – that, like "everyone" else, it is better to die shooting. Regardless, here Edelman and Krall embody Friedländer's process of the emergence and failure of interpretive frameworks. Having applied the Catastrophe and Heroism model to Warsaw's Jews, Krall is forced to face the implications of this framework:

> --My dear, Edelman says, you have to understand this once and for all. Those people went quietly and with dignity. It is a horrendous thing, when one is going so quietly to one's death. It is infinitely more difficult than to go out shooting. After all, it is much easier to die firing – for us it was much easier to die than it was for someone who first boarded a train car, then rode the train, then dug a hole, then undressed naked....Do you understand now? he asks.
>
> -- Yes, I say. I see. Because it is indeed easier, even for us, to look at their death when they are shooting than when they are digging a hole for themselves.... (167)

Under Edelman's tutelage, Krall revises her view of the heroic death. This interaction literally writes the reception of the narrative. In terms of Jauss's theory of the horizon of expectation, Edelman functions as the author of a new

narrative of the ghetto and Krall as the reader/audience. Jauss argues that texts do not arrive at the reader as a blank slate, shorn of associations. Rather, a new literary work already carries a complex series of expectations, which are established by "announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. [The text] awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the 'middle and end'" (23). These expectations are then either "varied, corrected, altered or even just reproduced" by the text (23). When the work does not simply reproduce, but alters expectations in some way, a gap occurs between expectations of the new text and the experience of it. Jauss describe this gap as "a disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a 'change of horizons' through a negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (25). Just such a "change of horizons" takes place in Krall and Edelman's exchanges about the Jews who died passively on trains. First, the horizon of expectations is established: "the people who were surging onto trains [were] worse than the ones who were shooting" (166). Edelman then disrupts this expectation, and after a period of adjustment Krall accepts the change. In this way Krall and Edelman perform the act of textual reception. Together they expand the reader's horizon of expectations and seek to change what heroism means in the context of the ghetto. Edelman offers an alternative valuation of life in which the heroic death is not permitted to devalue the passive death. This approach de-centres the

survivor and removes the living from the position of judgement over the dead. The reception of the text is thus written into the text itself. And as Jauss notes, this alteration extends beyond the relationship of the single reader to the single text: "[The] process of the continuous establishing and altering of horizons also determines the relationship of the individual text to the succession of texts that forms the genre" (23). As the horizon of expectations shifts, so too does the genre itself. Thus Krall and Edelman are engaged in an effort to influence more than simply the reception of *To Outwit God*; also at stake here is the meaning of the heroic narrative. Krall and Edelman seek to change the heroic narrative and its associated devaluing of the 'passive dead.'

After the failure of the heroic narrative: The role of historical fact

Given Krall and Edelman's profound distrust of the heroic narrative, it might be expected that the text would endorse a debunking of the heroic myth through a dogmatic adherence to historical fact. However, this is not the case. Indeed, the text repeatedly questions the value of accuracy. Antek, Anielewicz's deputy in the ZOB, disagrees with some details of Edelman's account:

> Antek has said, for instance, that there were not two hundred of them in the uprising, there were more: five hundred, maybe even six hundred of them.
>
> (--Antek says there were six hundred of you. Shall we change this figure?

--No, Edelman says, there were two hundred and twenty of us.

--But Antek wants, Mr. S. wants, everybody wants you to be at least a little more....Shouldn't we just change it?

--After all, it doesn't matter, he says angrily. Can't all of you understand that none of it matters anymore?!) (143-4)

Edelman initially refuses to accept Antek's numbers, but ultimately acquiesces, asserting that "none of it matters anymore."[12] Krall seems to expect that her willingness to change the figures will provoke Edelman in quite the opposite direction. She expects him to insist upon the absolute importance of factual detail. What does it matter, she asks, if there are 600 fighters instead of 220? Surprisingly, to Edelman it seems to matter very little. To the contemporary reader, however, it matters very much. Edelman's willingness to alter the number of resistance fighters shatters the modern faith in first-person testimony. Bernstein argues that "one of the most pervasive myths of our era, a myth perhaps even partially arising out of our collective response to the horrors of the concentration camps, is the absolute authority given to first-person testimony" (339).

Regardless of whether or not such authority is misplaced, Edelman's disinterest in the accuracy of his own testimony plays against expectations.[13]

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[12] Antek, whose real name is Yitzhak Zuckerman, published his own account of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising entitled A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. U of California P, 1993.

[13] It is essential to note that factual inaccuracy does not render testimony fictional. Felman and Laub emphasise that testimony can express profound psychological truth even when it contains

This dissonance raises the issue of the Holocaust's inherent inexpressibility. Edelman's disinterest suggests not that fact is wholly irrelevant, but that it fails to capture the essential nature of the Holocaust. It is this elusive nature of destruction that Edelman attempts to capture in his account. The impasse between fact and nature again erupts into the narrative during another exchange over factual accuracy, when Krall and Edelman discuss the banners that flew over the ghetto during the Uprising. Reportedly present in both the Polish and Zionist national colours, Krall asserts that "[t]hey provoked an outpouring of affection from the Aryan side" (237). But Edelman insists that the insurgents did not erect the banners:

> 'Perhaps someone else hung them, it doesn't matter who.'
>
> 'Oh yes,' he says. 'Possibly.' Only, he didn't see any banners at all. He only learned about them after the war.
>
> 'That's impossible. Everybody saw them!'
>
> 'Well, if everybody saw them, they must have been there, these banners. And besides,' he says, 'what does it matter? All that's important is that people saw them.'
>
> This is the worst part: that in the end he agrees to everything. And it doesn't even make any sense to try to convince him.
>
> 'What difference does it make today?' he asks, and then he agrees. (237-8)

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factual errors. See Testimony pp. 59-63. This distinction is often ignored in an effort to deter historical revisionists from using such errors to deny the Holocaust.

Edelman insists that "none of it matters anymore?!" because verisimilitude can no more fully represent the Warsaw Ghetto than can the heroic narrative. Ultimately, both methods fail to capture the experience of ghetto life. This is an essential aspect of Edelman's testimony: he rejects the ability of factual accuracy to truly capture the Shoah. Although his rejection of the heroic narrative might be expected to produce a profound reliance on verisimilitude, this does not occur. Edelman does not replace the heroic narrative with a reification of factual accuracy. As his debunking of Mordecai Anielewicz indicates, Edelman uses fact to correct mythmaking because such legends implicitly devalue the passive death. Factual accuracy is thus a means to an end and not a goal in and of itself. Edelman himself explains his disinterest in verisimilitude by invoking the inexpressibility of the Holocaust:

> Listen, my dear. Do you have any idea what bread meant at that time in the ghetto? Because if you don't, you will never understand how thousands of people could voluntarily come for the bread and go on with this bread to the camp at Treblinka. Nobody has understood it thus far.
>
> They were giving out that bread right here, in this very place. Oblong, browned loaves of rye bread. (138)

Here the text juxtaposes material details of ghetto life and inexpressibility. Even as Krall stands in the former Umschlagplatz with a survivor of the ghetto and listens to the description of what the bread looked like, she "will never

understand."[14] Accuracy of detail, direct contact with a witness, pilgrimage to the locale of destruction: these cannot assure comprehension. Bernstein notes that insistence on the impossibility of comprehension is common in Holocaust narratives: "[A]ll of the writers on the Shoah speak of its *incomprehensibility* and basic *incommunicability*" (341). Even the faithful recreation of historical fact cannot vanquish this incomprehensibility.

Nevertheless, Edelman still hopes that comprehension is possible. His comment that "[n]obody has understood it thus far," implies that such comprehension may still be hoped for. This optimism indicates the problematic nature of Edelman's deconstruction of ghetto heroism. He doubts that Krall can ever really understand the Umschlagplatz, and asserts that the ghetto's signification is restricted. Why, if signification is so severely limited, does it matter how Anielewicz is remembered, and why should Edelman believe his corrections signify at all? There are cracks in Edelman's insistence on the limits of signification and communicability. The fact that Edelman wrote *The Ghetto Fights* and spoke with Krall for *To Outwit God* suggests a fundamental belief that signification is both possible and important. And the passion with which he writes of the many thousands who died in the ghetto also indicates faith in communicability. The fate of Poland's Jews matters deeply to Edelman and he works hard to communicate what their experience was like. His attention to detail is notable; in *The Ghetto Fights* in particular, he strives to recreate the

[14] It is significant that Edelman insists upon this gap even with Krall, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust by hiding in Aryan Warsaw. Despite Krall's proximity to the event, and her own Jewishness, Edelman still insists that she cannot "understand" what the ghetto means. This insistence indicates just how highly restricted Edelman believes the ghetto's signification to be.

sensory experiences of waiting for a transport, as well as the psychological realities that led people to line up for trains heading to Treblinka. As well, at the sixtieth anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising, Edelman asserts that the revolt's meaning transcends the ghetto walls:

> After our struggle, there were rebellions in the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination camps, in the ghettos of Bialystok and Czestochowa. We shook the conscience of the Polish underground army and international opinion. We started a process that later led to formulation of the idea of the fight for human dignity and rights included in the U.N. Charter.

Edelman's commitment to inexpressibility may have more to do with defending the dead than with restricted signification. If the ghetto is incomprehensible, then its inhabitants cannot be criticised for their choices. As Steinlauf notes of Edelman, "he doubted whether any conventional moral categories and notions of heroism were adequate for coping with the impossible choices faced by Jews in that 'other world'" (107). *To Outwit God* and *The Ghetto Fights* both challenge the heroic narrative's ability to represent the Warsaw Ghetto, even as they insist on the almost sacred specificity of the ghetto experience. Thus Edelman may invoke inexpressibility and limited signification to protect the many passive dead from the critical and uncomprehending eye of the living. As Edelman notes in

The Ghetto Fights, the very vocabulary of heroism fails to capture the experience of the ghetto: “One can hardly speak of victories when Life itself is the reason for the fight and so many people are lost” (83).

Chapter 3

The Polish Heroic Narrative Confronts the Ghetto

I have just uttered the word 'Jew' and it grated on the ear. You winced yourself. Why is it that every time Jews and Poles come together, there is immediately tension in the air? I feel that the person facing me wonders whether I am an anti-semite. This feeling is like a paralysis; I am choking on this word: 'Jew.'

Ewa Berberyusz

We French, we know what it is, an occupation. It's terrible. You can never do anything under occupation. You can certainly not create a government because it looks like a stooge to the occupier. You're locked into your own trap.

Pierre Lellouche, VP NATO Parliamentary Assembly

I hope you forgive my laying bare memory like a wound....It is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds.

Czesław Miłosz

Polish accounts of the Second World War are steeped in a national heroic narrative. This narrative is often evoked in relation to the Warsaw Rising, a Polish armed revolt against the German occupiers. By summer 1944 Germany was clearly on the brink of defeat. The Russians were advancing on the Eastern Front, and were expected to reach Warsaw by August. General Sosnkowski, the

Polish President in exile, was confident in President Roosevelt's support for a popular uprising in Warsaw. He assured his citizens that Allied military forces would come quickly to the aid of armed resistance. Intent on liberating Warsaw themselves, on 1 August 1944 Polish civilians and soldiers launched a revolt against the German occupiers. Too poorly armed to stand for long against the German army, the rebels planned to liberate the city just before the arrival of Russian troops. But Russian assistance did not come. Despite Roosevelt and Churchill's continued pleas, Stalin refused to support the Polish fighters. When the United States decided to send its own soldiers to Warsaw, Stalin would not allow American planes to refuel on Soviet territory, thus making American air support for the revolt impossible. In response to the uprising Himmler ordered all Warsaw citizens killed, including women, children and civilians. Brutal street fighting ensued, with much of the population taking refuge underground in bunkers and sewers. During this time the Russian army stood massed at the city's edge, just across the Vistula River. They did not intervene. On October 2nd the surviving Polish rebels surrendered. Over 200,000 Poles died in the sixty-three day battle, and over 500,000 were deported after the surrender. In further retaliation for the revolt, Germany destroyed over eighty percent of Warsaw.

Warsaw's citizens were abandoned for political reasons. Historians have speculated that London and Washington failed to defend Warsaw because they did not wish to alienate Stalin on the brink of Hitler's defeat. Russia's contribution to the Second World War dwarfed that of the United States; twenty million Russians died in the conflict compared with 450,000 Americans. On the

basis of such sacrifice, Stalin demanded that one-third of Poland be ceded to Russia after the war. By 1944, Roosevelt had already agreed to this demand. Stalin's refusal to aid the Warsaw revolt was intended to secure the devastation of Poland's extensive underground resistance, and in particular the underground's army.[15]

Despite the terrible cost of the Warsaw Rising, Poles do not view it as a mistake. In contrast, the uprising is understood as a natural expression of the Polish heroic narrative. Zofia Korbonski, an underground radio operator and a surviving participant in the rising, replies to the question of whether the revolt was worthwhile: "Always. It was, you know, in accordance with Polish history. It was in accordance with Polish attitudes. It was in accordance with Polish soul and heart" (*Warsaw Rising*). This is a clear invocation of a national heroic narrative. The Warsaw Rising is not simply the heroic act of individual Poles; it is the embodiment of the nation itself. As Polonsky notes, "[I]n Poland the tradition of active resistance to tyranny is highly valued and actively cultivated" (22). And this active resistance is not limited to armed uprising. Even when violent revolt is impossible, the Polish narrative demands resistance. Jan Karski, a courier for the Polish underground, instructs a wayward young man on the Polish heroic chronicle:

> I traced an outline of the bloody history of the Polish struggle against conquerors since the partition of 1795. I stressed the fact that if that resistance had stopped, Poland would never have come

[15] See Norman Davies' Rising '44, Richard C. Lukas' The Forgotten Holocaust, Michael C. Steinlauf's Bondage to the Dead, and the film Warsaw Rising.

> to life again as a country. We would have no language or land of our own. It was a serious mistake, I told him, to think that resistance consisted only of offering physical opposition to the conquerors. More important still was the maintenance of our character and spirit against the brutalities and blandishments of our enemies. (295)

Significantly, in this narrative resistance leads inexorably to survival. Although individual Poles perish in revolt, Polish "character and spirit" endure. It is this endurance that allows Zofia Korbonski to assert that the Warsaw Rising was "absolutely" worth 200,000 Polish lives. In this sense the Polish heroic narrative is the story of national rather than individual survival. Polish sacrifice ensures that the nation will eventually break through the chains of oppression.

The national heroic narrative, so cognisant of Poland's suffering, is challenged by the Holocaust. A perceived lack of international recognition of Poland's affliction during the Second World War has led to claims that Poles endured a "forgotten holocaust." This conviction that the wartime privations of Poland's gentile population are neglected is both widespread and varied. CNN recently presented a documentary entitled *Warsaw Rising: The Forgotten Soldiers of World War II,* which tells the story of the doomed Polish revolt of 1944. Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz wonders of the Warsaw Rising, "And should not the young generations of the West, if they study history at all, hear about the 200,000 people killed in Warsaw, a city sentenced to

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annihilation by these two accomplices [Hitler and Stalin]?" (Nobel address).[16] At times, the 'forgotten holocaust' argument extends beyond pleas for recognition and instead establishes a direct competition between Polish and Jewish suffering. In this argument the world's attention is assumed to be finite, and the two peoples engage in a contest to determine the greater victim. One example of this discourse, Lukas's *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation,* demonstrates the slightly absurd nature of this competition. Lukas argues that if the war had continued, the Poles would eventually have faced the same fate as their Jewish neighbours:

> [T]he conclusion is inescapable that had the war continued, Poles would ultimately have been obliterated either by outright slaughter in gas chambers, as most Jews had perished, or by a continuation of the policies the Nazis had inaugurated in occupied Poland during the war – genocide by execution, forced labor, starvation, reduction of biological propagation, and Germanization. (5)

[16] Not all such petitions for increased attention to Polish suffering are quite so egalitarian. Richard C. Lukas's *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation,* places the Polish narrative in direct competition with the Jewish chronicle. Lukas attempts to deny Jews the mantle of suffering by asserting that not all Jews were victims. In his chapter on Polish-Jewish relations during the German occupation, Lukas examines a 1944 Polish commission's investigation of claims that the desertion of 79 Jewish soldiers from the Polish army was a result of anti-semitism. Lukas asserts that the commission "found that a sizeable percentage of Jewish soldiers were unpatriotic and were motivated by personal ambition and politics in their desertions...Now with the upcoming invasion of Normandy, it appeared all too coincidental to observers that many Jewish soldiers simply did not want to fight" (137). Lukas concludes that Jewish nationalism, and not anti-semitism, was the cause of the desertions. The deserters chose to flee to Palestine rather than fight the Germans. Lukas's analysis suggests that the Jewish deserters were in fact, 'bad Poles,' and in this way he excludes them from the Polish heroic narrative. Lukas does not consider the possibility that Poland's few remaining Jews might have viewed escape to Palestine as their lone chance for survival.

This claim to authenticity is based on an almost hopeful prediction of the destruction of all of Poland. Such a vigorous pursuit of a claim to an equality of suffering verges on the surreal. If these are the authenticating claims, then what is at stake? This perspective is typical of one strand of the Polish Holocaust narrative, which "stresses huge Polish losses and sacrifice during WW II, Polish efforts to rescue Jews on the penalty of death, and the indifference of the rest of the world, especially the Allied forces and American and Palestinian Jewry" (Glowacka 15). The unspoken implication of arguments such as Lukas's is significant. Diner argues that such universalising narratives write Jews out of the Holocaust: "Such instances are the efforts to deny the Holocaust's Jewish victims a specific fate, grounded in anti-Semitism, by means of a narrative structure aimed at universalisation, or to locate the Holocaust within a long sequence of identical or similar events; in short, to transform the tale of the Holocaust into a narration beyond Jewish historical experience (315)." But the Holocaust was undeniably a Jewish experience, and despite Lukas's analysis, the Jewish and Polish fates under German occupation were not the same. While three million Polish Jews died under Nazi occupation, compared with two million Poles, these numbers constitute almost 90 percent of Poland's Jewish community and 10 percent of the Polish population.

Nowak and Karski: Two Poles encounter the Holocaust

Polish accounts of the German occupation encounter the national narrative in differing ways. Two such texts are written by men who, despite their

varied approaches to the heroic narrative, filled the same role in the Polish underground. The underground relied heavily on couriers to communicate with the Polish government in exile. Jan Karski was one of the first of these couriers, and he relates his wartime experiences in *Story of a Secret State*. After Karski left this role he was replaced by Jan Nowak, who recounts his story in *Courier from Warsaw*. The two narratives are similar in many ways, but their perceptions of the heroic narrative are notably divergent. From its very first pages, Nowak's text is set in the explicitly heroic terms of the Polish national narrative. In the foreword, Zbigniew Brzezinski describes *Courier from Warsaw* as "a gripping account of personal heroism" (13). Brzezinski's description of Nowak reads like a spy novel:

> As a young member of the Polish underground, Jan Nowak undertook numerous secret missions to keep the resistance in contact with the West. He served as an emissary, surreptitiously crossing enemy lines. Employing many disguises, Nowak traveled in secret to Scandinavia, Britain, North Africa, even across Nazi Germany itself to Switzerland and France. He faced countless dangers, was usually only a step ahead of the Gestapo, but miraculously escaped arrest and certain death. He was involved in adventures which read like a file scenario. (13)

In marked contrast, Jan Karski rejects such portrayals. In *Story of a Secret State*, Karski writes of the civilian expectation that the underground is glamorous:

> In their vision underground workers met briefly, usually at night, and in dangerous circumstances and eery [sic] surroundings. Illumination for these thrilling scenes was supplied by flickering candles. The conspirators wore masks and spoke in tense whispers. They behaved like a cross between an extraordinarily sagacious detective and a reckless gambler staking his last coin on the turn of a card.
>
> Nothing could be further from the truth. The motion pictures I have seen and the fiction I have read about the Underground in Europe are invariably products of purely sensational imaginations...For the most part, our work was probably less thrilling, less of an adventure, than the work of a carpenter, and was wholly devoid of sensational exploits. (275)

Karski's description seems to speak directly to Brzezinski's account of Nowak. The difference between the two texts lies in their relationship to the heroic narrative. *Courier from Warsaw* is firmly placed within this chronicle, while a different interpretive framework animates Karski's account. In Brzezinski's foreword the clandestine nature of Nowak's experiences is emphasised; they are "secret," take place "surreptitiously" and require him to use "many disguises." His context is international rather than domestic; the young courier travels not just throughout Poland but to Allied and occupied territories alike. Nowak's experiences are described as "adventures" and the reader is advised that he "faced countless dangers." The breathlessness of the prose is matched by its

sincerity. The heroic narrative is not treated ironically here, in either its personal or national incarnations. Nowak's experiences as a courier are treated as genuinely heroic and glamorous; and *Courier from Warsaw* engages the Polish heroic narrative in a similarly sincere manner. Indeed, Nowak's proximity to momentous events in the oppression of Poland is offered as proof of his narrative's credibility. He begins his account with this claim to both personal and national consequence:

> I was the eyewitness to the Polish drama in World War II....My first secret trip....was taken at a time when Stalin had broken off relations with the Polish government in London. It was the beginning of a game which would lead to the subjugation of Poland by the Soviet Union....I was the first eyewitness to, and participant in, the Warsaw Uprising to reach the West....The events which I witnessed, and the politicians' reaction to them, led to the division of Europe and, later, to the Cold War. (11)

Nowak opens his narrative with a heady invocation of both personal glamour and national suffering. In contrast, Karski rejects the national heroic narrative and recasts the personal as a heroic commitment to bear witness. Karski attempts to witness the Jewish extermination, while Nowak subsumes the same destruction within the Polish national narrative. The difference between *Courier from Warsaw* and *Story of a Secret State* may be that Nowak does not share Karski's experience of witness. Although Nowak took over Karski's role as courier, he did not cross the ghetto wall or see a death camp. This lack of direct witness

fundamentally alters Nowak's text. Thus *Story of a Secret State* demonstrates how the Polish heroic narrative is challenged by a commitment to bear witness, while *Courier from Warsaw* demonstrates the process by which the Polish national narrative silences the Jewish extermination.

Jan Nowak and the practice of narrative exclusion

Courier from Warsaw describes Jan Nowak's experiences as messenger to the Polish government in exile. Nowak did not publish his memoirs until 1982, after a career as director of the Polish Section of Radio Free Europe and national director of the Polish American Congress. This professional interest in Poland's independence is evident throughout Nowak's account of his wartime experiences. Indeed, the Polish heroic narrative serves as the superstructure of *Courier from Warsaw*. Nowak places his personal experiences within the wider context of the Polish nation's struggle against oppression. He draws a straight line between the 1940s underground resistance and the Solidarity movement of the 1980s. Like the personal heroic narrative, this connection is first established in the text's foreword. Brzezinski notes, "The roots of Solidarity spring from the unity of the Polish people forged during the [Warsaw] uprising and from a history of struggle and resistance to foreign oppression. This will to resist asserted itself in 1944 and again in 1980" (14). In the final pages of his account, Nowak returns to these historical linkages. He argues that "the real effects of the Warsaw Rising only became apparent in the years after the war, when Stalin succeeded in making Poland his satellite...Though Poland had no means to defend her

independence, she successfully resisted all attempts at Sovietization. After a third of a century, Poland remains an island in the Soviet sea" (451). Brzezinski and Nowak assert that it is the Warsaw Rising that nurtured such resistance. In hindsight, the failed Warsaw Rising serves as sustenance for the beleaguered Polish spirit. Of course, it is only after 1980 that Brzezinski can connect the Warsaw Rising with the Solidarity movement. He and Nowak 'read backwards' here, and this interpretive strategy allows the heroic narrative to contain defeat. The 1944 revolt was mercilessly crushed by the Germans, and abandoned to failure by the Red Army who waited across the Vistula for the destruction of Polish armed resistance. The uprising failed to liberate Warsaw or to ensure an independent post-war Poland. But Nowak asserts that it succeeded in nurturing the seeds of an independent Polish spirit. The meaning of heroism shifts here from political to religious revolt and from armed to "passive resistance" (452). Thus even as armed resistance fails the heroic action continues to signify. The narrative of resistance endures; it is only its form that changes. This conversion is not limited to the Warsaw Rising; a similar interpretive shift is also applied to the initial defeat of the Solidarity movement: "The Solidarity movement has been crushed as an organised force, but it may continue to serve as a common front for people determined to use passive resistance as their ultimate weapon" (452). Like the Warsaw Rising, the early failure of Solidarity's political goals is replaced by success in spirit and morale.

In this way the national heroic narrative is not dependent upon political or martial success. Events such as the 1944 revolt and the Solidarity movement

occasion a shift in the heroic narrative, but they do not cause it to fail. The narrative's content can be corrected, edited and altered without breaching its essential meaning. While the form of heroism alters, the ideal of heroism is not abandoned. This frequent shift in interpretation does not weaken the narrative. Nowak openly acknowledges this ever-transforming interpretation:

> It was wrong to see the Warsaw Rising solely as a demonstration to the outside world inspired by false hopes...[A]s time gave distance to these events, I began to see that my analysis was one-sided, incomplete, and therefore, quite wrong....The underground leaders were also deeply concerned for the morale of the population, which had to be maintained to confront whatever the future had in store. (451)

What the future had in store was the communist occupation of Poland. Here Nowak rewrites his contemporary interpretation of the rising in view of events yet to come. This is the adaptability of the heroic narrative; it can convert political and military failure into spiritual success. In this sense the Polish heroic narrative is relentless. As long as Poland's innate heroism is reiterated, the narrative endures. However, the lengths to which the narrative must go to assert this heroism become more and more extreme. In the final lines of *Courier from Warsaw* the heroic narrative moves even further away from political and military success. Like Marek Edelman in *The Ghetto Fights,* Nowak ends his account with the names of his compatriots who died during the German occupation of

Poland. However, unlike the Jewish Edelman, Nowak places this recitation of names within an implicitly Christian context: "Their sacrifice was not in vain. Our day of victory will also come. One day the sun will shine on crowds of singing and dancing people drunk with joy in the streets of Warsaw. The free soul of Poland will survive until that day" (453).[17] This scene recalls the New Testament's promise of justice delivered in the afterlife. The book of Revelation speaks of "a new heaven and a new earth" where deferred hope will at last be fulfilled. After the failure of the Solidarity movement, Nowak no longer speaks of the spiritual heroism of the Polish people, but invokes an otherworldly image of perfect freedom and joy. The fulfilment of the national heroic narrative is thus displaced into the afterlife. In this way the narrative endures, but in the form of apocalyptic rather than earthly hope.

It should be noted that this Christian reference is common to Polish narratives. When armed resistance is impossible the Polish heroic narrative frequently constructs resistance in explicitly Christian terms. Nowak invokes the Polish Pope John Paul II as a symbol of Poland's spiritual survival under Soviet occupation (451, 452). And Jan Karski also acknowledges the Christian context of resistance when he mentions the "Lord's Prayer of the Polish Underground," a

[17] Nowak was writing his account during the period of martial law in Poland, which began in December 1981. During 1980 the Solidarity Movement, under the leadership of Lech Walesa, made great gains for organised labour and democracy. Due to mounting public pressure, the Communist leadership recognised unions' right to strike and organise freely. But in 1981 Defence Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski was appointed prime minister and quickly declared a state of martial law. The Solidarity Labour Union was outlawed and Walesa was imprisoned. By 1988 Solidarity was once again legalised, and free elections were held in 1989, in which Walesa was elected prime minister.

re-writing of the Our Father as a polemic on national resistance to the Germans (271-2). This Christian context obviously limits Jewish participation in the national heroic narrative. If resistance is defined in Christian terms, Jews are at least semantically excluded from communal defiance of the oppressor. In Nowak's Christian image of apocalyptic hope for the Polish nation, Jews are excluded even from the promise of freedom in the afterlife. In the Polish heroic narrative there is precious little room for Jews, even in visions of an unrealised future.

Despite this deferral of the heroic narrative's promised victory over oppression, Nowak continues to insist upon the significance of Polish suffering. Continued interpretation implies a profound commitment to the idea that the Polish nation's tragedies are meaningful. Nowak's unfaltering interpretation insists that these events matter. The act of analysis is itself an assertion that the sufferings of the Polish people have meaning; and the heroic narrative is the interpretive framework Nowak uses to extract meaning from events like the Warsaw Rising. But what does the constant imposition of a single framework on the national narrative exclude? What is silenced when the Polish experience is only expressed within the straitjacket of the heroic narrative? In *Courier from Warsaw*, the answer is the experience of Polish Jews. Nowak is not hostile to Jews, but his account pays eerily little attention to the extermination. Nowak describes his conversations with underground leaders in preparation for his missions to the West. One such contact is Henryk Wolinski, expert on Jewish affairs. Nowak asserts his own heroic role in relaying the information gathered

by Wolinski: “I was to be the first man to reach London after the rising in the Warsaw ghetto and the total extermination of its inhabitants” (173). But after outlining the extent of the material he and others provided, and briefly lamenting the West’s failure to act, Nowak moves abruptly on to another contact and his area of expertise. The next paragraph discusses how the Home Army gathers its information, and provides no mention of the Jewish extermination. This jarring transition reflects the missing story of the ghetto in the Polish heroic narrative. The genre cannot contain those who die pointlessly, thus Nowak’s story literally stops after his role and the West’s failure to act have been related. There is no place for passive death in the heroic chronicle. Destruction is not transactional – it is perceived outside the ghetto walls but the Polish narrative has no response to this perception. The destruction of millions of Polish Jews who did not resist, although briefly lamented, receives no sustained attention in Nowak’s narrative.

In contrast, those who resist can be absorbed into the narrative, even if they are Jewish. Nowak briefly mentions the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as “the martyrdom of the Jews” (274). The ghetto insurgents died heroically, and their resistance fits the Polish heroic narrative. As Steinlauf observes, “the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising could be assimilated into the Polish insurrectionary tradition” (109). Thus Jews are not excluded from the Polish narrative simply by virtue of their cultural and religious identity. The Polish tradition can contain extensive bloodshed, and is accustomed to sacrifice. As Nowak observes of Polish-Soviet relations, “The Kremlin, mindful of the lesson of the Warsaw Rising, is well aware that it is dealing with a nation which would make supreme sacrifices if it believed

certain imponderable national treasures were at stake" (451). The supreme sacrifice is not negated by failure, as the Polish interpretation of the doomed Warsaw Rising indicates. But it cannot contain death that is both passive and meaningless.[18] The final pages of *Courier from Warsaw* are filled with references to Poland's suffering and eventual, inevitable victory over oppression. The Warsaw Rising is identified in these pages as a source of inspiration and heroism because of its contribution to the enduring spirit of the Polish people. Without this critical element of survival, the Rising could not be incorporated into the national narrative. Sacrifice must therefore be meaningful; it must nourish those who carry on after the martyrs' death. There must, in this sense, be someone left to carry on. In the Jewish narrative, no such population exists. For these reasons the Jews who died without resistance cannot be assimilated into the Polish heroic narrative, and hence their rare emergence in Nowak's text.[19]

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[18] It should be noted that the Polish heroic narrative is not the only national chronicle that has difficulty acknowledging the passive death. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's account of Auschwitz, published in Europe under the title *Is this a Man?* is for the North American edition re-named *Survival in Auschwitz*. The original title poses a question that it fails to answer, and the query remains open, implicating the reader in the decision. This uncertainty about the humanity of the concentration camp inmate is erased from the North American edition. *Survival in Auschwitz* is the title of a heroic narrative with a heroic protagonist, and heroes are clearly human. The question of the original title is thus not only answered, but also silenced.

[19] Although not present in Nowak's text, one way for the Polish heroic narrative to contain the Jewish destruction is to attribute the life of every Jew who survived the Holocaust to heroic Poles. In this interpretation, Jewish survival is always due to the sacrifice and courage of their Polish neighbours; if a Jew survived, it is because a Pole helped him at great cost. Makolkin's work on biography may clarify the power implicit in biographical appropriations of the heroic narrative:

> The voice of the biographer, name-giver, reaches its crescendo after the subject's death which is the moment of the naming climax....The death of the hero celebrates the beginning of something new: the legendary presence of the *name-symbol* after his actual death. This moment is also a significant period in the life of any biographer who builds the monument to himself in the process of erecting the monument to the hero. It is through the name of the 'Other' that a biographer (or any writer for that matter) immortalises himself (18.)

In this interpretation the subject's heroism signifies something about the biographer, rather than about the subject herself. As Glowacka notes, this reflective framework has semantic life in Poland: "[I]t is hardly a coincidence that the word 'survivor' is usually translated into Polish as

Jan Karski: The Heroic Witness

Jan Karski was born in the Polish city of Łódź. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Karski was serving in the Polish army. After Poland's defeat he was recruited to the underground and, among other duties, worked as a courier to the Polish government in exile. In this role Karski travelled between Poland, England and France, carrying documents and informing the West about the situation in his homeland. In 1944 he published *Story of a Secret State*, his account of these wartime experiences. After the war he moved to America and spent much of his career as a professor of government at Georgetown University.

Following the publication of his book Karski did not speak publicly of his time as a courier until the 1980s, when Claude Lanzmann insisted that he participate in the making of the film *Shoah*. As Karski relates, "At first I refused. But Lanzmann persuaded me. He told me that it was my duty to speak. And finally, I consented" (Kozłowski 95). This commitment to witnessing is the interpretive framework of *Story of a Secret State.* The term 'courier' itself is inadequate to describe the breadth of Karski's testimonial role, as it implies merely the delivery of information from one party to another. But Karski was no mute conduit; in addition to carrying information between Poland and London, he also provided the government with first-hand knowledge of the Polish situation. Later in the war Karski testified about the situation in Poland to nations other than

'ocalony.' This relatively new term in Polish vocabulary, formed from the past participle of the verb 'ocali□,' means, literally, a person who was saved" (20).

his own, and became the voice of his homeland's suffering to many Allied officials. In this sense Karski's primary task in the underground was to witness. One of the events to which he bore witness was the extermination of Poland's Jews. Karski carried reports on the Jewish destruction out of the ghetto and even travelled behind the ghetto wall himself. In *Story of a Secret State*, to bear witness to the Jewish extermination is conceived as a heroic act. After witnessing the 'hunt' of Jewish children by Nazi soldiers, Karski flees the ghetto in horror and panic. But he returns: "Two days later I repeated my visit to the ghetto, to memorise more vividly my visual impressions. With my two guides I walked again for three hours through the streets of this inferno, to better testify the truth before the leading men and women of the free countries of the world" (334). This rigor is an essential element of Karski's heroic witness. He returns to the ghetto despite his revulsion and horror in order to "better testify the truth." Bearing witness is heroic because it has the power to effect change, and, as discussed earlier, active intervention in the world is a fundamental tenet of the heroic narrative. For Karski, it is an article of faith that rigorous, credible testimony is effective. He has carefully honed the act of bearing witness to the extermination of the Jews in order to achieve this goal:

> I began my story in a cut-and-dried fashion. I had finally, after much experience, mastered a kind of formula for these situations. I had found that, on the whole, the most effective way of getting my material across was not to soften or interpret it, but to convey it as directly as possible, reproducing not merely ideas and instructions

> but the language, gestures and nuances of those from whom the material came. That has been my job – faithful, concrete reproduction. (335)

Karski is powerless to directly intercede and prevent the destruction of the Jews; he cannot personally stop the deportations or pull down the ghetto walls. The action available to him is that of influence through "faithful, concrete reproduction." As an underground courier, he has the ear of Polish and Allied officials. Faced with personal experience of the extermination, and helpless to stop it, Karski confers heroism upon the act of bearing witness. Given the circumstances, this task is particularly amenable to heroic interpretation. Entering the ghetto, witnessing the death camp at Majdanek, and illicitly travelling to the West all place Karski in mortal danger. He provides testimony at great risk to himself, and at no personal gain: Karski is not a Jew, he has no personal attachment to Jews, and as Nowak's exclusion of the Jewish narrative indicates, he is under no national obligation to bear witness to the extermination. Nevertheless, he takes on the role of witness and places himself under the obligation to provide testimony. Karski interprets these tasks as heroic because they are dangerous, self-sacrificing and, he hopes, effective. This attitude is made clear in the description the courier offers of his duty after meeting with the ghetto leadership:

> This was the solemn message I carried to the world. They impressed it upon me so that it could not be forgotten....At this time more than 1,800,000 Jews had been murdered....The truth might

> not be believed. It might be said that this figure was exaggerated, not authentic. I was to argue, convince, do anything I could, use every available proof and testimonial, shout the truth till it could not be denied. (323)

Bearing witness to the Jewish extermination is heroic partly because so much weighs on Karski's success. Like Nowak's emphasis on his proximity to great events, Karski's personal role is stressed here. Thus even as he rejects Nowak's glamorous heroism of adventure, Karski distills the heroic narrative into a heroic witness, and defines himself as protagonist in terms of this testimonial role.

Karski's heroic witness is most visible in his experience and testimony of the ghetto and the camp. The courier recounts these experiences with remarkable compassion; Felman and Laub describe him as "the most honest, generous and sympathetic outside witness" in Lanzmann's *Shoah* (232). Karski's compassion and heroism grow from his insistence that he witness the destruction himself. This is a crucial element of Karski's narrative: he does not simply relate details of the extermination as he has heard them from others. Karski actually views the ghetto and a death camp himself. When the Jewish leaders tell Karski, "[W]e know the truth and we can put you in a position to confirm it with your own eyes" he accepts their offer:

> It was, indeed, the report of an unprecedented species of brutality that I had to bring to the outside world. But my report was not merely to be based on their uncorroborated word-of-mouth stories.

> They offered to take me to the Warsaw ghetto so that I could literally see the spectacle of a people expiring, breathing its last before my eyes. They would take me into one of the many death camps where Jews were tortured and murdered by the thousands. As an eye-witness I would be much more convincing than a mere mouthpiece....I told them that I had to see these things for myself....Unless I had first-hand acquaintance with what I had to report I did not feel equal to the task. (324, 325)

The equation here is very simple: to see is to know.[20] Karski's personal encounter with the ghetto converts Jewish accounts from "uncorroborated word-of-mouth stories" into "truth." Vision turns rumour into fact. Once Karski has seen the ghetto, the extermination moves from the unsteady realm of "stories" to the reliability of a "report." Karski's witness makes the ghetto official; it can now be included in a statement for government use. This transformation is an urgent one, as hope for intervention lies solely in official recognition of the Jewish destruction. The witness then does not exist for his own sake; testimony is highly instrumental. Karski's personal encounter with the ghetto reduces the gap between his audience and Warsaw's Jews. This intimacy makes him a more effective witness, for the credibility of the testimony is dependent upon the credibility of the witness. In Karski's case, his credibility is based on first person

[20] Many accounts attribute the lack of Allied intervention in the extermination of the Jews to just this relationship between witnessing and knowledge. (See Nowak p. 275-6, Kozłowski p. 95). Although Washington and London knew of the ghettos and the death camps, many suggest that they simply could not believe it to be true. Such an interpretation implies of course that if Churchill and Roosevelt had seen the Warsaw Ghetto and Majdanek with their own eyes, they would have acted differently.

experience of the destruction. But this experience is not the most immediate testimony available. It is essential to note the irony of this emphasis on credibility; Karski's testimony is valuable precisely because he is not a Jew. The testimony of those directly affected by the Final Solution is assumed to be tainted, and Karski's status as a Gentile grants him objectivity. He is not Jewish, and in the ghetto a gentile is needed to verify Jewish testimony as to Jewish extermination.

The witness's credibility is further aided by his apolitical stance. When General Sikorski, the first President of the Polish government in exile, sends Karski to inform the world of Poland's situation, the courier's independence is emphasised: "Remember one thing, under no circumstances are you to make your report dependent on the political situation or the type of people you address. You will tell them the truth and only the truth....You are not representing the Polish Government or its policy" (386, 388). This emphasis on Karski's impartiality suggests that testimony is more effective if it is not couched within a nationalist framework. Karski's inability to speak for Poland makes his testimony more sincere; the voice of the individual is believed to be more genuine and less mediated than that of a nation. Karski-the-man rather than Karski-the-delegate can speak, as it were, without an agenda. This stripping of national credentials seeks to assert Karski as pure witness. Neither a nationalist nor a Jew, Karski offers transparent testimony thought to signify nothing beyond what it has seen. This claim of authenticity inversely implies suspicion that testimony can be

corrupted. Karski's bracketing of his national identity is intended to allay these fears and emphasise the reliability of his testimony.

Once Karski's credibility as a witness is established, he offers his testimony. In the final pages of his account, Karski stresses that he has used his credibility and converted his experience into testimony. After describing his visit to the ghetto, Karski tells the reader how he has fulfilled his obligation to testify:

> I reported my experiences to outstanding members of the British and American governments, and to the Jewish leaders of both continents. I told what I had seen in the ghetto to some of the world's great writers – to H.G. Wells, Arthur Koestler, members of the P.E.N. Club – as they could describe it with greater force and talent than I. I told it to others, too, and to no one in particular, who will never be heard from again. (334)[21]

This passage is particularly haunting as it directly follows Karski's account of the 'hunt' he witnesses in the ghetto. Karski sees two members of the Hitler Youth walking though the ghetto: "They chattered, laughed, pushed each other in spasms of merriment....[One boy] began looking for a target with the casual, gay absorption of a boy at a carnival....He raised his arm and took careful aim. The shot rang out, followed by the noise of breaking glass and then the terrible cry of a man in agony" (333). After such a brutal event, the text begs the question 'What did you do about it?' Karski answers this query with a tale repeated and

[21] This recalls Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and the curse to repeat the tale; Primo Levi uses Coleridge's poem as the epigraph to The Drowned and the Saved, an account of the Holocaust.

repeated again, told to the powerful and powerless alike, recounted simply because it must be recounted.

Karski enters the Warsaw Ghetto

Unlike Jan Nowak, Karski enters the ghetto and views the Jewish extermination with his own eyes. The chapter in *Story of a Secret State* that describes these visits differs markedly from the rest of the text. In Karski's account of his wartime experiences, his tone is generally measured and often impersonal. He emphasises the importance of the underground movement as a whole, and treats his own role in the resistance with modesty. When Karski prepares to leave on a second illicit trip to England, Polish underground officials remind him of the risk involved: "'Are you really willing to go? Last time you took a trip we had a devil of a time getting you away from the Gestapo. By the way, how are your hands?'" (316). The reference to Karski's hands recalls the torture the courier endured during his previous trip west. But Karski does not respond directly to the inquiry about his willingness to travel. Instead, he answers the question about his hands: "'I went through a grafting operation a few months ago,' I said, gazing at my hands myself, as if I had suddenly discovered them for the first time. 'Apart from a few small scars, they have healed well. Our doctors did a remarkable job'" (316). Karski's assertion that his hands have healed serves as a response to the question of his readiness. This understatement is typical of the tone throughout much of *Story of a Secret State*. Karski does not comment on the bravery implicit in once again travelling to London, nor does he

provide details of his feelings about this risk. Whatever Karski's emotions, they generally remain unspoken. The focus of the text is indeed on the 'secret state' of the title and the largely objective tone reflects this focus. The only exception to this steady tone occurs during Karski's imprisonment and torture by the Gestapo. During this time the courier speaks often of his emotional state, such as when he confesses, "Despite the heartrending evidence of the sympathetic attitude of those around me, the future appeared as black as ever…I could see endless days spent in feigning sickness, in temperature readings, in whispered consolations of doctors and nurses" (175). Karski's despair is evident here, but after escaping the Nazis and recovering from his injuries, the courier's emotional tenor steadies once more, as his discussion with underground leaders about his second trip west attests.

However, this emotional reserve vanishes in Karski's account of the Warsaw Ghetto. In this section of the text, the courier's tone is markedly different, and this change in tone reflects the relentless physicality of the ghetto chapter. The corporeal is first foregrounded in Karski's description of the two Jewish leaders who tell him of life inside the ghetto: "The two men were unforgettable, less like men than incarnations of mass suffering and nerves strained in hopeless effort" (321). While not exactly a physical description, this portrayal uses physical imagery to evoke the body of the ghetto itself. In this passage the reader does not learn what the ghetto leaders look like, but what their existence is like; characteristics such as height and eye colour are abandoned in favour of a description of "nerves strained in hopeless effort." Here

Karski offers an emotional and mental portrait of embodied suffering. The courier's description of the Jewish leadership also reflects the constriction of those trapped inside the ghetto walls: "The word trickled slowly from his pursed mouth….'It is impossible,' they hissed, raising their fists as if threatening all those who were on the other side of the barricade" (328, 327). Here words are both strangled and marked by great urgency; in its tone, this passage is the opposite of the reportage common to much of *Story of a Secret State*. Words are not spoken clearly and loudly, but "hissed" as they escape from the "pursed mouth." Constraint is everywhere; speech is not free but stifled. The strangled speech act echoes the restriction of the Jews in the ghetto, and the seething, strained tone suggests pressure built to the point of explosion. In this chapter, Karski's prose is fevered, rushed, agonised, and the immense physicality of the prose is startling after the measured quality of earlier sections.

The Jewish leaders' embodiment of the ghetto profoundly impacts Karski, who is traumatised by what he witnesses. In this sense the ghetto leaders' testimony is transactional rather than performative, as Karski himself physically experiences the corporeal representation of Warsaw's Jews:

> More and more these two frantic figures pacing the floor in the shadowy room, their steps echoing in the hollow silence, seemed like apparitions….Their voices were pitched very low, they hissed, they whispered, and yet I had the illusion that they were roaring. It seemed to me that I was listening to an earthquake, that I was hearing cracking, tearing sounds of the earth opening to swallow a

> portion of humanity. One could hear the cries and shouts of the frantic people falling into the chasm. (326-7)

In response to such physicality Karski experiences his own bodily trauma. He says, "I turned pale," and "I felt tired and feverish" (324, 326). Indeed, Karski characterises the entire interaction with the Jewish leaders in terms of physical suffering: "It was an evening of nightmare, but with a painful, oppressive kind of reality that no nightmare had. I sat in an old, rickety armchair as if I had been pinned there, barely able to utter a word while the torrents of emotion broke over me" (322). After listening to the leadership's demands the courier is shaken: "I sank into my armchair. My whole body felt chilled and sore. I was shivering and I felt the pulses in my temples pounding. I rose to go" (328). It is interesting that Karski responds to this physical urgency with action: "I rose to go." Faced with the embodiment of suffering, he chooses to witness the destruction for himself, and thus hopefully make change. Ironically, in doing so Karski takes exactly the action that is unavailable to Jews trapped in the ghetto, and who have nowhere to go.

After being confronted with the body of Jewish suffering, Karski joins that body in order to witness it. He enters the ghetto disguised as a Jew: "I wore an old, shabby suit and a cap pulled down over my eyes. I tried to make myself look very small and thin" (329). After joining the Jewish body and passing through the wall, Karski's record of the ghetto is almost completely corporeal. Physical description is relentless and initially drives away all other commentary: "Everyone and everything seemed to vibrate with unnatural intensity, to be in constant

motion, enveloped in a haze of disease and death through which their bodies appeared to be throbbing in disintegration" (330). The parade of corporeal suffering continues with the spectacle of mothers "nursing withered infants. Children, every bone in their skeletons showing through their taut skins, played in heaps and swarms" (331). Immediately after Karski witnesses this scene Jewish work crews pass by, and then once again the narrative moves on, this time to the corpses abandoned in the streets. It is not until Karski witnesses the mothers nursing their infants that the courier begins to ask his guide to explain what he sees: "Frequently we pass by corpses lying naked in the streets. 'What does it mean?' I asked my guide. 'Why are they lying there naked?'" (331). Karski's guide reports that there is no money to bury the dead. Through these explanations both Karski and the reader begin to grasp what these images mean inside the ghetto wall. Even these clarifications, however, are terse and minimal. When Karski asks about the absence of the elderly, and wonders if they simply "stay inside all day," one of the Jewish leaders responds harshly: "'No. Don't you understand the German system yet? Those whose muscles are still capable of any effort are used for forced labour. The others are murdered by quota'" (332). These explanations provide a glimpse of ghetto life, but little more. Karski's guides offer no interpretation of what their suffering means, or indeed why it occurs. Instead, the body takes on bloated and huge presence here, blotting out concerns such as signification. This lack of interpretation of the parade of suffering reflects the experience of the ghetto itself, where overwhelming physical need subsumes all else.

Interestingly, this flood of physical detail has an unexpectedly impersonal affect. Even as the courier temporarily takes on the identity of a Jew, the Jews around him appear less human. For Karski, the ghetto is strangely anonymous: "A cemetery? No, for these bodies were still moving, were indeed often violently agitated. These were still living people, if you could call them such. For apart from their skin, eyes, and voice there was nothing human left in these palpitating figures" (330). Confronted with such suffering, Karski doubts the humanity of the ghetto inhabitants: "As we picked our way across the mud and rubble, the shadows of what had once been men or women flitted by us in pursuit of someone or something, their eyes blazing with insane hunger or greed" (330). This characterisation recalls the *muselmänner* of the death camps, inmates who are neither alive nor dead. Primo Levi, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, describes these creatures as "an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand" (90). This uncertain humanity explains why Karski's relentless, sensate observations do not individuate the ghetto inhabitant. Despite the flood of physical detail, the Jews in the ghetto are anonymous; nothing Karski relates makes them identifiable. Unlike the two Jewish leaders with whom Karski initially meets, the ghetto inhabitants remain a largely unindividuated mass.

The emphasis on physicality in this section drives away the reserved, careful tone of earlier chapters. Even at the level of tone, Karski must alter his narrative to describe the ghetto. It seems nothing can cross the wall and remain as it is: not narrative, tone or even Karski himself. The wall alters, and it is unclear whether Karski's experience of the ghetto heals as neatly as do his tortured hands.

Preventing rupture: Karski's conclusion

Viewing the ghetto is not the end of Karski's task; it is only later, after he has met with President Roosevelt, that Karski believes his testimony is complete. He describes the fatigue that sets in after his conversation with Roosevelt as "the satisfied weariness of the workman who has just completed his job with a last blow of his hammer or an artist who signs his name under the completed picture" (388). Karski's work is done. He has testified to the President of the United States; there is no higher authority and his witness is therefore complete. But this satisfaction is fleeting. When American passers-by appear unaware of Europe's suffering, Karski's momentary peace is disrupted: "I sat down on a bench and watched the people go by. They were well-dressed and looked healthy and complacent. They hardly seemed to be affected by the war. Events passed through my mind in quick, strange fragments" (388).[22] Memories of the

[22] It is essential to note that this internal struggle takes place in front of a statue commemorating a Polish hero. Karski pauses at the feet of Tadeusz Kościuszko, a Pole who fought voluntarily for the cause of American freedom in the War of Independence. An engineer, Kościuszko designed the defences of major American fortresses and provided key strategic advice. He was awarded the rank of Brigadier General for his contribution to the American victory. After the revolution Kościuszko returned home to Poland where he sought to obtain similar freedoms for his own people. He was appointed commander in chief of the Polish army and led an insurrection during

years of war flash before Karski's eyes. His characterisation of these memories as "fragments" is telling. The courier cannot shape them into a coherent narrative, as the sentence structure in this passage indicates. The memory fragments are also sentence fragments, which reflect the disjointed nature of the narrative. The passage is composed of brief flashes of the past whose arrangement in temporal order does not produce a cohesive narrative. Karski himself foregrounds the chaotic nature of this experience: "The exquisite salon of the Portuguese Minister in Warsaw and then, abruptly, without any transition, the heat, dust, and smoke of battle and the bitterness of defeat. The endless chaotic march eastward and the futile search for non-existent detachments. Then the whistling winds and the bleak Soviet steppes" (388). This semantic disruption echoes a failure of Karski's interpretive framework. In these lines his faith in the heroic witness falters. Having spent several days bearing witness to American officials, Karski is distraught by the apparent indifference of the American public. The transparent witness has assumed a similar transparency of audience. Karski's alarm at the "complacent" passers-by is perhaps due to his conflation of Roosevelt and his citizens. The President is transposed onto the American body politic, so that bearing witness to the individual is conflated with testifying to the many. But the pedestrians' complacency suggests that the audience is more complex than previously assumed. In this moment Karski's vision of the witness as transparent is breached. If the audience is more complex, then the witness's influence is compromised. This newly composite audience has profound

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which he abolished the system of serfdom and promised equal freedoms for all Poles. But the revolt failed and Kościuszko lived the rest of his life in exile. He remains a symbol of both Polish

implications for the effectiveness of Karski's testimony. The heroic witness is premised on an assumption that testimony spurs action, but despite Karski's committed testimony, the world appears indifferent. His faith in the witness's power is based on the assumption that the audience will take up the testimony with the same rigor that he applies to the task. But what if, like the passers-by, Roosevelt rejects testimony's imperative to act? What if testimony fails?[23] In *Story of a Secret State* this failure produces narrative and semantic fragmentation. But forty years later the former courier more openly acknowledges Roosevelt's inaction. Karski remembers, "I was under the spell of the President. He radiated power and dignity. Today I see this conversation in a different light. Apart from polite generalities, he said nothing important, either on Poland or on Jewish questions. He said only that Poland had a friend in the White House and that the Nazi criminals would be punished after the war" (Kozłowski 93). In Karski's account the suspicion that the audience fails to act provokes a crisis in bearing witness.

This crisis of testimony is perhaps also related to Karski's unsteady position as witness. In Washington he seems to recognise that he is more like the American passers-by than the Jews in the ghetto. He has witnessed the Jewish destruction, he has testified to it, but he is not a target of this extermination. Although the Nazis seek him, he will not die in the ghetto, or in a camp. Nevertheless, Karski is profoundly affected by what he has witnessed:

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desire for freedom from oppression and the unrealised fulfilment of that desire.

[23] It should be noted that this failure is not Jan Karski's but the failure of witnessing itself. Witness famously falters at Auschwitz, and this failure is the preoccupation of much of Holocaust studies. See Theodor Adorno's Negative Dialectics for foundational work on this problem.

"The images of what I saw in the death camp are, I am afraid, my permanent possessions. I would like nothing better than to purge my mind of these memories....But more than that, I would like simply to be free of them, to obliterate the very thought that such things ever occurred" (352). This freedom is not within Karski's reach. His experience of the destruction binds him to remember and to testify, despite his desire to be free of such images. In addition to his memories of others' suffering, Karski's own experience of torture at the hands of the Gestapo also draws him closer to the Jewish experience. After enduring torture in Nazi custody, Karski tries to commit suicide, but is discovered by a guard. Having recovered, Karski is returned to prison where the sympathetic guard argues that it was wrong for him to attempt suicide:

> 'You should not do a thing like that,' he added solemnly. 'It is a sin and everyone has some reason to live.'
>
> Our conversation languished, while I thought how easy it was to think philosophically about pain and torture if they happened to someone else. How could one explain that after a certain stage of pain had been reached, death became the aim of insensate longing, the greatest of privileges. I tried to make this clear to him....
>
> 'I still believe,' he said at length, 'that it is a sin to try and take one's life. You say the future may be hopeless for a person. But how does one know the future?'
>
> I smiled rather bitterly.

'I know my future. What do you think the Gestapo will do with me after they have finished their questioning?' (173)

Here Karski encounters the gap caused by incommensurate experiences of suffering. Despite his kindness, the Slovakian guard cannot understand Karski's action and thus condemns it. Sympathy is not enough to bridge the gulf between suffering and security. In this exchange Karski experiences something of the ghetto wall; not only does the Slovakian fail to recognise that their respective positions are incomparable, he also believes he can pass judgement on Karski's actions. Of course, Karski's position is not wholly equivalent to that of the Jews. The courier is an individual, not an entire community, and he is rescued by the Polish underground, escapes the Gestapo and survives the war. This is clearly not the fate of most Jews. Nevertheless, in this exchange between guard and prisoner, Karski experiences something of the alienating effect of the *univers concentrationnaire*[24], the world which suffering renders utterly separate and incomprehensible to normal existence. Thus Karski's own suffering enhances his ability to relate to the Jewish condition, and also to testify to what such a condition is like.

But despite this glimpse of the Jewish predicament, Karski remains essentially outside the ghetto wall. This externality is primarily defined by his freedom. Despite Karski's sympathy for the Jews, and his determination to help them, he is not himself trapped inside the ghetto. In contrast, motion rather than

[24] Coined by David Rousset and used as the title of his 1947 book, *L'univers concentrationnaire* refers to the utterly distinct world of the concentration camps; George Steiner draws on this concept when he writes, "*L'Univers concentrationnaire* has no true counterpart in the secular mode. Its analogue is Hell."

stasis defines the courier. Karski is able to aid the Jews precisely because he has freedom of motion, and can escape to the West. A woman in the ghetto recognises this fundamental separation of Karski from the Jews. After witnessing the 'hunt' in the ghetto, this woman approaches Karski: "At length I felt someone's hand on my shoulder. Repressing a nervous start, I turned around. A woman, the tenant of the apartment, was standing there, her gaunt face the color of chalk in the dim light. She gestured at me. 'You came to see us? It won't do any good. Go back, run away. Don't torture yourself any more.'" (333). The fact that Karski can "run away" makes him an outsider; although he witnesses the ghetto, he is not truly a part of it.

From this external position, can Karski ever truly bear witness to the experience of the other? Felman and Laub say no: "Since for the outsider, even in the grief of his full empathy and sympathy, the truth of the inside remains the truth of an exclusion….it is not really possible to *tell the truth*, to testify, from the outside….The *inside of the ghetto* in effect remains to him as utterly *impenetrable* as a bad dream" (232). Szmul Zygelbojm, a Polish Jew who worked in the Jewish underground until escaping to the west, echoes this unbridgeable gap. When Zygelbojm meets with Karski in London, he asks the courier for details of the ghetto: "He asked me….did I remember the words of the child dying in the street. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah, I forget. You can't talk Yiddish, you are not a Jew'" (337). Karski is separated through language as well; he cannot truly understand the ghetto. This is not to suggest that a Jewish witness's testimony is more credible, or more likely to spur audience action. Indeed, history indicates

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that Jewish testimony of the Holocaust was similarly unable to effect intervention. Rather, it is to highlight the multiple difficulties of Karski's position. He is not what he witnesses, and yet he is not ignorant. Karski is neither American passer-by or ghetto inhabitant. This is the curious bind of the witness who is also the 'other': that which makes him a credible witness is also that which separates him from those he witnesses. As Felman and Laub argue, this bind is characteristic of every attempt to bear witness to the Holocaust. They assert of the Holocaust that "*the event produced no witnesses*":

> [I]t was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event. (80, 81)

Karski's status as an outsider allows him to escape some of the "coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame" that Felman and Laub refer to; he visits the ghetto but does not live and die there. But this very escape also denies him the ability to provide the testimony he so desperately wishes to offer. Karski knows

but does not know, and despite his efforts his testimony does not achieve the desired effect. The narrative attempts to compensate for this failure as Karski continues to seek ethical and practical solutions to an impossible situation.

In *Story of a Secret State,* Karski's doubts about bearing witness are tightly contained and are not permitted to rupture the narrative. These doubts emerge most clearly in the courier's confused reaction to American passers-by. Just one page before this encounter with the pedestrians, Karski's testimony to American officials gives him a sense of well being, and confidence that action will follow witness. This confidence is based on Karski's belief that the world is one: "I realized then to what an extent the entire world is unified. It seemed to me as though the network of which I was a part performed some function in a single, world-wide organism – an organism from which no member, not even the most powerful, could separate itself" (387). Karski's faith in the power of his testimony is emboldened by this hope of global obligation. His testimony will bear fruit, he believes, because Poland and America are part of the same "organism." But the apparent indifference of the passers-by threatens this faith in unity. If the underground state and Roosevelt's government are not linked, if "the most powerful" can separate themselves from the rest of the world, then Karski's testimony carries no obligation to action. These are the doubts that emerge in Karski's observation that the passers-by "hardly seemed to be affected by the war" (388).

In order to prevent these doubts from rupturing the narrative, in the text's final lines Karski severely limits his testimonial task and tightly curtails the

witness's obligation. The fact that this limitation occurs at the very end of the narrative is significant. As Koch notes in her discussion of Holocaust representations,

> A particular ending produces contexts of reception which are important insofar as they close not only a fiction but also our perception of it and open the way to a final point of view on the represented events....'The end' of a work constituted by a succession and sequences of images....can acquire the function of an Ariadne's thread leading us back through the labyrinth of past events....The end separates us, as it were, from what we have seen and experienced and allows us to regain distance from the events. (398)

After reviewing the "fragments" of war, the text ends with the words of General Sikorski, the first Polish President in exile. Sikorski instructs both Karski and the reader on the scope of obligation:

> I am not giving you any recommendations or instructions. You are not representing the Polish Government or its policy. The facilities with which we supply you are purely technical. Your task is only to reproduce objectively what you saw, what you experienced, and what you were bidden to tell about those in Poland and the other occupied countries of Europe. (389)

Here the earlier semantic and metaphysical dislocation is finally overwritten with cohesion. The text ends with a paragraph constructed of long, inter-related

sentences in which the courier's task is made clear. Interestingly, Karski himself cannot provide this unity; he cannot make sense of the fragments. Instead, an authority that limits the witness's task redresses the apparent failure of testimony. This conclusion clearly aids Karski's anxiety over the failure of his testimony. But the limitation of the witness's task also has implications for Karski's representation of the Warsaw Ghetto. Early in the text Karski insists on the specificity of the Jewish experience under German occupation. As a witness, he asserts that what he sees is unique:

> I know history. I have learned a great deal about the evolution of nations, political systems, social doctrines, methods of conquest, persecution, and extermination, and I know, too, that never in the history of mankind, never anywhere in the realm of human relations did anything occur to compare with what was inflicted on the Jewish population of Poland. (321)

But this specificity does not stand. The end of the text subsumes the Jewish experience into the general task of bearing witness. This equivalent fidelity to all that is witnessed renders Poland's Jews simply one of many memory fragments: "Then toil in the underground, humdrum, secretive, and dangerous. The ghetto and the death camp, the memory bringing nausea, the whispered words of the Jews, like the roar of mountains. Then Unter den Linden – Berta, Rudolph. People I had once loved and whom I now detested" (389). This is the main text's final note on the Jewish extermination. And the narrative's postscript fails to make any specific mention the Jewish destruction. Indeed, Karski identifies the

purpose of his account in nationalist terms: "I hope that...out of such narratives the free peoples all over the world will be able to form an objective opinion as to how the Polish people reacted during the years of German conquest" (391). It is essential to note that the limitation of Karski's narrative is based not on a lack of pity but on desperation. His task has failed, and in the face of such failure he invokes the Polish narrative of unacknowledged suffering.

Story of a Secret State is a portrait of what occurs when destruction is witnessed, and the witness cannot effect change. Karski's text asserts the centrality of the heroic witness, and then narrates that figure's failure. When this interpretation of the heroic narrative falters, the courier returns to the Polish heroic narrative in an attempt to impose meaning on the German occupation. Like Karski, Jan Nowak also knows of the destruction of Poland's Jews, but *Courier from Warsaw* does not attempt to represent this knowledge. Instead, Nowak eschews the task of bearing witness in favour of incorporating the Second World War into the national heroic narrative. Despite his awareness of the Jewish extermination, Nowak refuses to respond to it. Thus his account reveals what happens when destruction is known, but not narrated. These two Polish accounts of Jewish suffering grapple in differing ways with the Warsaw Ghetto. Nowak's narrative essentially silences the Jewish experience, while Karski's attempts to testify to the destruction do not succeed in halting it. In this sense the two texts have very different aims: Karski attempts to have an impact on the extermination, while Nowak regrets the Shoah but declines to narrate it. Despite their differences, both approaches use the heroic narrative to grant meaning to

the destruction, one by minimising its significance and subsuming it within a larger narrative of national endurance and the other by emphasising the heroic nature of the witness.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

One can hardly speak of victories when life itself is the reason for the fight.
Marek Edelman

Having considered what is revealed when Jews and Poles regard the Warsaw Ghetto through the lens of the heroic narrative, we are left with a series of contradictions. Certainly the Polish and Jewish use of the heroic narrative is itself highly contradictory, as many sources vociferously claim that the two sides of the wall are utterly disparate. Indeed, both Poles and Jews assert that the ghetto wall does not simply separate one world into two, but that it is an engendering as well as divisive force in that it engenders an entirely new world inside the wall. In *Story of a Secret State*, Karski describes crossing this boundary: "To pass that wall was to enter a new world utterly unlike anything that had ever been imagined" (330). In his celebrated poem "Campo di Fiori," Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz writes of this dislocation from the Polish perspective: "[T]hose dying alone,/ forgotten by the world,/ their tongue grew strange to us,/ like the tongue of an ancient planet./ And all will become a legend." And Simha Rottem, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, describes the uncanny experience of stealing from one side of the wall to the other during the revolt:

> We found a tunnel under Bonifraterska Street that led out into Aryan Warsaw. Early in the morning we suddenly emerged into a street in broad daylight. Imagine us on that sunny May 1, stunned to find ourselves in the street, among normal people. We'd come from another planet....In Aryan Warsaw, life went on as naturally and normally as before. The cafés operated normally, the restaurants, buses, streetcars, and movies were open. The ghetto was an isolated island amid normal life. (Lanzmann 198)

Felman and Laub concur with Karski, Miłosz and Rottem: "[T]here is a radical, unbreachable and horrifying difference between the two sides of the wall...the outside and the inside are qualitatively so different that they are not just incompatible but *incomparable* and utterly *irreconcilable*" (236). This remarkable accord perversely results in contradiction: how can the texts of two such "irreconcilable" experiences both employ the heroic narrative?

The very fact of the writers' continued application of the heroic narrative to the ghetto constitutes a second paradox. The narrative persistently recurs in accounts of the ghetto despite its apparent inability to represent the universe inside the walls. The genre's basic assumptions fail to function in the ghetto, and in this way the Jewish extermination repeatedly confounds the heroic narrative and its attendant conditions. The difference between the heroic narrative and the Warsaw Ghetto may be encapsulated as follows: In the ghetto, Jews are militarily and economically overmatched by their opponents; Jews enjoy no external, all-powerful aid; the opponent does not suddenly fail or weaken; heroic action does

not stop the Jewish extermination; and heroic action does not inspire others to revolt because of limited resources and the opponent's policy of terror. In contrast to the heroic narrative, it is limited resources and not individual heroics that define the Warsaw Ghetto. But perhaps the most significant failure of the heroic narrative in the ghetto is that of agency. Linked to the failure of the beautiful death, the failure of agency haunts the Warsaw Ghetto. Polish narratives and the heroic genre itself repeatedly question why the Jews did not act sooner in their own defence. An examination of the reasons for this lack of agency illuminates the failure of the heroic narrative. In response to the question of agency, Emmanuel Ringelblum asserts that this "crazy paralysis" can be attributed to "the fairy tale about the 'resettlement in the East'" (159). Although the Jewish Combat Organisation knew the truth of the deportations, it could not convince the ghetto public of this danger: "[N]ot equipped with arms and at that point unable to evoke a response from the population, [the organisation] had to watch passively while hundreds of thousands....were led to the slaughter" (Ringelblum 161). Gross provides another explanation for the slow move to action. He invokes the totalitarian concept of "[t]he institutionalisation of resentment....People subject to Hitler or Stalin's rule were repeatedly set against each other and encouraged to act on the basest instincts of mutual dislike. Every conceivable cleavage in society was eventually exploited, every antagonism exacerbated" (4). In *The Ghetto Fights*, Edelman notes that inside the wall this cleavage is most visible in the separation of the wealthy and the destitute:

> Those who had money sought the essence of their existence in comfortable living.... Those who had nothing, the paupers, sought their 'happiness' in a rotten potato recovered from a garbage pit, found evasive joy in a piece of begged-for bread with which the taste of hunger could, for a while, be stilled. These were the tragic contrasts of the ghetto so often exploited by the Germans, photographed for propaganda purposes and maliciously presented to the opinion of the world. (46)

In accordance with Gross's observations, ghetto starvation is exploited by the Nazis and offered as evidence of Jewish depravity.

Hunger is not the only condition that limits agency; the German practice of collective responsibility, in which the entire population is held accountable for the acts of every individual, also works to limit resistance. During the spring of 1942, Germans killed between ten and fifteen ghetto inhabitants each night; the victims were chosen without explanation or provocation. Edelman describes the goal of this terrifying strategy: "The purpose behind it was to implant fear among the population to such a degree as to render it incapable of any instinctive or organised actions, to cause the fear of death from the Germans to paralyse even the smallest acts of the people's resistance and to force them onto the path of blind, passive subordination" (54).

Taken together, these material conditions combine to deny the ghetto agency. Dr. Franz Grassler, deputy to the Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw

Ghetto, responds to Claude Lanzmann's questions about the purpose of the ghetto:

> [Grassler] Our mission, as I recall it, was to manage the ghetto, and naturally with those inadequate rations and the overcrowding, a high, even excessive death rate was inevitable.
>
> [Lanzmann] *Yes. What does 'maintain' the ghetto mean in such conditions: the food, sanitation, etcetera? What could the Jews do against such measures?*
>
> [Grassler] They couldn't do anything. (184)

Thus disparate economic status, the terrifying practice of collective responsibility and suffocating material conditions splinter the ghetto population, and the possibility of collective action is in this way denied. Although overcoming obstacles is part of the hero's task, the heroic narrative presupposes the ultimate feasibility of resistant action. This flawed presumption of agency is perhaps the most fundamental way in which the heroic narrative fails to represent the ghetto. The call for Jewish resistance presupposes a unified Jewish body politic. Uprising requires unification, but both Ringelblum and Edelman assert the bleak reality that Nazi rule splinters any such undivided subject. The gap between destitution and wealth, and the deadly response to resistance, fragment the ghetto population. This fragmentation, the splintered Jewish subject, cannot therefore engage in unified resistance. No collective is left to take action. In this

way the heroic narrative assumes a unified body that does not exist in the Warsaw Ghetto.[25]

These contradictions – the use of a single genre by two disparate populations, and the application of the heroic narrative to a context it cannot represent – raise the question of why the heroic narrative is used to interpret the Warsaw Ghetto. Why should a genre that so profoundly fails to contain the ghetto be so persistently applied to it by such incompatible narratives? What is the enduring and dogged appeal of the heroic genre? Thomas Carlyle offers a compelling explanation. To return to his 1842 text *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic*: Carlyle asserts that the heroic narrative is a chronicle of order and orientation. The task of the hero, the "Great Man," is to impose harmony on disintegration:

> [E]very Great Man, every genuine man, is by the nature of him a son of Order, not of Disorder....His mission is Order; every man's is. He is here to make what was disorderly, chaotic, into a thing ruled, regular. He is the missionary of Order. Is not all work of man in this world a *making of Order*? The carpenter finds rough trees; shapes them, constrains them into square fitness, into purpose and use. We are all born enemies of Disorder: it is tragical for us all to

[25] Both Ringelblum and Edelman assert that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising transcended this rupture because of the shocking effect of the deportations of 1942. Mass murder unified the splintered Jewish population, and drove many to participate in the Uprising. However, this unification was not total, as evidenced by the fact that not all ghetto inhabitants participated in the Uprising. It is a case of a specific subject reassembling.

> be concerned in [sic] image-breaking and down-pulling; for the Great Man, *more* a man than we, it is doubly tragical. (Carlyle 319)

The heroic narrative, by virtue of the hero's actions, orders the disordered stuff of the world. The genre often takes disorder as its subject matter; in many different cultures, the heroic narrative relates tales of suffering and memorialises loss and warfare (Bowra 48-78). Bowra asserts that the creation of heroic poetry may even have been impelled by such a communal "grief at some outstanding loss" (16). Society then attempts to restructure the loss through the heroic genre: "[Society] wishes to see these newly discovered qualities presented on a wider and less impermanent stage, and then it takes to heroic poetry, which tells how great men live and die and fulfil the promise to which they are born" (16). This is the task at work in the accounts by Edelman, Krall, Nowak and Karski. The imposition of the heroic narrative on the Warsaw Ghetto is an attempt to order the experience of the Shoah; in both Polish and Jewish accounts, the heroic narrative tries to reassemble a fragmented ghetto. The genre, although severely limited, offers the tantalising promise of redemption. In such an interpretive framework, suffering is granted meaning, and all death is in this sense beautiful. Even mass slaughter can be interpreted as significant if it is followed by heroic action. For such action, even if it fails, has an impact on the world. This is the mirror image of the ghetto, in which great valour does not arrest extermination, and the splintering of the Jewish subject restricts agency. The imposition of the heroic narrative on the Warsaw Ghetto is an act of interpretation; it is the expression of a wish that the ghetto be different than it is. In this sense,

accounts that emphasise the heroism of the Uprising fighters seek to rewrite the ghetto. In such an interpretation, the revolt of the few ultimately silences the passivity of the many. Krall notes the difference between ghetto reality and ghetto monument: "[N]one of them ever looked like this: they didn't have rifles, cartridge pouches, or maps; besides, they were dark and dirty. But in the monument they look the way they were ideally supposed to. On the monument, everything is bright and beautiful" (207). Krall's interpretation is excessively dismissive – the application of the heroic narrative is in many ways a sympathetic endeavour. For instance, by using the heroic narrative to construct himself as a heroic witness, Jan Karski demonstrates how that narrative could undergird an attempt to prevent the destruction of the Jews. His task of course ultimately fails, and in this sense *Story of a Secret State* is itself a disrupted heroic narrative. In a less sympathetic reading, Jan Nowak subsumes the ghetto within the Polish heroic narrative so that it disappears within a nationalised chronicle of suffering. Edelman and Krall are perhaps the most complex example of the strange endurance of the heroic narrative. They regard the heroic narrative itself as disordered. It is the genre's assumption that the passive death is less valuable than the beautiful death that they seek to correct. Nevertheless, their vehement rejection of the heroic genre implies a fundamental preoccupation with it. And notably, although Edelman and Krall suggest the need for a new interpretive framework, they do not identify such an alternative. Bernstein suggests that the failure to endorse a new narrative form occurs because no comprehensive narrative exists: "There is, in other words, no single order of memorable

testimony, no transparent paradigm of representation, that can address the different narrative needs of all those gripped by the subject [of the Holocaust]" (341-2). In the face of such tragedy, what other genre is appropriate? The relentless need to understand. Is it all we have to represent great tragedy? What would a narrative that did not invoke heroic tropes look like? How could national identity be preserved? What does the heroic narrative offer that other genres cannot? The issue is perhaps not that the heroic narrative is the only genre capable of representing great suffering. Rather, it may be that this genre offers an irresistibly redemptive interpretation of tragedy. A different kind of narrative could certainly preserve civic identity, but this change would alter the chronicle's content, and perhaps consequentially alter the national identity itself. The genre in which a nation's story is told is much more than just narrative scaffolding; as seen in this thesis's discussion of Poland, genre also influences the chronicle's content. Without the apocalyptic hope of freedom from oppression, Poland's history of great suffering is definitive rather than prelude. The Polish national narrative eternally waits on the dawning of its own history, anticipating the moment when the 'people's history' will begin and generations of frustrated hopes will be realised. In the absence of this constantly deferred hope, Poland becomes not a great nation waiting to be born, but one people among many with a long and mostly unrelieved history of repression. Similarly, elevating Mordecai Anielewicz and his compatriots to heroic status provides the ghetto with models of armed resistance. The fighters offer a crucial answer to the question of why Europe's Jews did not act in their own defence. This answer also serves

as a rebuttal to suggestions that the Holocaust could have been averted through organised revolt – an argument of course that places responsibility for the destruction on the shoulders of its victims. But if, as Edelman insists, the heroic death is no more valuable than the passive death, then the ghetto fighters too are victims, and the post-war Jewish community must contend with a past of victimisation. However, in the heroic narrative of the ghetto, the resistant few somehow redeem the deaths of the passive many. The great promise of the heroic narrative, then, is the assurance of a future in which past suffering may be redeemed and ordered. The texts considered in this thesis all struggle with the heroic narrative in just such an attempt to make meaning of the ghetto. All insist by implication that sense can be made of it, that the experience of the ghetto can be ordered and interpreted, and that the task of interpretation is itself worthwhile, even in the distinct world of the Warsaw Ghetto.

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