ANTEK

I want you to know something about Yitzhak. I'm his wife and we were together there in everything, and you can say that whatever I say is subjective. . . . What can I do . . . I'm convinced it's the objective truth. By now, there are no witnesses left except me and I say [. . .]: if it weren't for Yitzhak, we Halutzim would not have had the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising! Only one step—and we would have been swallowed up in the darkness of the Holocaust without a trace.

—Zivia Lubetkin

Yitzhak Zuckerman (1915–1981; known by his underground pseudonym Antek) was one of the organizers and leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB—Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa) that led the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. After the ghetto revolt was crushed and Jürgen Stroop, the Nazi general in charge of the operation, declared Warsaw "*judenrein*," Antek directed clandestine ZOB operations on the "Aryan" side of the city, where about 20,000 Jews were hiding. In August 1944, he commanded a unit of Jewish fighters in the Polish Uprising.

After the Liberation, Antek remained in Poland until late in 1946 to help the Jewish survivors returning from the concentration and death camps as well as Jewish refugees and exiles coming back from the Soviet Union. He was one of the major figures of Brikha, the organization to smuggle illegal Jewish immigrants to Palestine. And, after the horrifying massacre of Jews in Kielce, in "liberated" Poland, in 1946, he was in charge of evacuating Jews from there.

In the spring of 1947, he immigrated to Palestine and was one of the founders of the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz and a moving force in the establishment of the important Holocaust museum and research center, Beit Katznelson, located there.

This book is an account of his activities during "those seven years" (as the book is titled in Hebrew), from 1939 to 1946, which spanned the greatest catastrophe in Jewish national history. What is significant about this time frame is that it does not lift the event out of its time; the book neither begins with the ghetto and the resistance nor ends with their demise. Rather, it sets them in the specific social and political context that preceded them and goes on to recount the continuation of resistance activity after the liquidation of the ghetto and after the end of the war.

But it is not a "typical" memoir; Antek did not sit down and write a continuous narrative of that time. It emerged out of the dedicated efforts of a group of friends connected with Beit Katznelson, the Holocaust Museum at Kibbutz Lohamei Ha-Getaot. Yoske Rabinovitch describes the inception of the project in his introduction to the Hebrew edition:

> Antek's close friends who frequently met with him in friendly gatherings of two or three [. . .] during the evening—would hear him tell each time another tale, another episode, another fragment of an experience, and another portrait of a friend—and each time they were surprised; sometimes they heard expressions of grief and pain, and even rage and rebuke. And you clearly sensed how deep was the well and how heavy the burden, the burden of memory he bore on his shoulders. "I feel in my soul that I'm a thousand years old, since ever hour *there* counts for a year in me," he once told me. He tried to get rid of this burden with his constant energetic activity, devotion and initiative, to expand the museum, renew its exhibits, publish witness accounts and research, produce documentary films, establish a school to teach the Holocaust and the Uprising. . . .
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> We knew he wouldn't yet release his personal book, stored up inside him. So we kept begging him—and he kept rejecting it as if he were retreating from it.

It was not until the Yom Kippur War in late 1973, which shook the foundations of Israeli confidence, that Antek agreed to record his book on tape with his friend Yoske Rabinovitch. The project was begun in January 1974, and Antek imposed two conditions. The first was his proposal that he himself would not refer to any documents, sources or books on the period, but would rely solely on his own memory. As he put it, "Maybe I'll succeed in preserving the climate of those days, the experience of then; not to tell anything new, but to tell what I thought and what I felt then."

Hence, on one level, this is a study of the nature of memory and remembering. Clearly, Antek had a prodigious memory capable of presenting hosts of people and situations often with an extraordinary vividness and density of detail and affect. (Although he refrained from consulting documents while the discussions were being taped, he had spent several years engaged in articulating the history of the resistance in Nazi-occupied Poland.)

Antek claimed that he "suffered from a surplus of memory," whereas others tended to forget. Perhaps one reason for the copiousness of his memory is that what he had to remember about himself in the past didn't impair his identity in the present. That is, except for one or two relatively minor incidents he reports, Antek didn't suffer the kind of humiliation and degredation we have come to expect in survivor accounts of the Holocaust. Although he spent a short time in a labor camp near Warsaw,

he had almost no direct contact with the Germans. He led a life of fear and hiding and tension; but it was not the emotional and physical degredation of the camps.

The resistance fighters, whose lives were completely and self-consciously devoted to revolting against the Nazi regime, succeeded throughout all the horror they experienced in maintaining their integrity. Hence, they can afford to remember the quality of those events in detail.

Antek's second condition was more serious: he demanded that the tapes not be transcribed and certainly not published until after his death. Yoske Rabinovitch asked him for an explanation of this stipulation:

> These were his main reasons: he claimed that as long as he was sure that things would remain hidden for a long time, he would be freer in his tale; thus he could lift the prohibitions and perhaps tell maybe "ninety percent and maybe ninety-five percent of what he had." Whereas "five percent of the things should better go down to the grave with me. But these are things that can't change or add anything to the main thing, since they are things that are only between me and myself." And the second reason, in his words: "You know me and you know that I'm like that 'famous humble man.' But the real truth is that I was among the few who knew 'everything,' or 'almost everything,' and I had a hand in almost everything that was done, throughout those years. And if I talk freely—I would have to talk in the first person, in sentences that begin with the word 'I': I said, I went, I did, and so on. And just imagine that the book appears while I'm still alive, with all those I's. Could I hold my head up and look people in the eye? No, I couldn't!

The taping continued throughout 1974 and, when it ended, there were thirty-eight tapes with almost sixty hours of conversation, recorded in forty sessions with Yoske Rabinovitch and Yudke Helman. After Antek's death in June 1981, the tapes were transcribed and a decision was made to extract the questions and present the text as a continuous narrative, with as little editing of the material as possible. This unorthodox composition technique accounts for occasional repetitions in the text as well as for some seemingly peculiar shifts of time in the narrative. However, it also lends a quality of immediacy not often found in autobiographical narratives where the author is in control of the image of himself that he presents. Antek was talking with friends about the past and the man comes through with a rare force.

Hence, though this is a book of history, it is not a history book. As Rabinovitch says,

> this is not a systematic, consistent and objective history book, . . . Certainly it isn't scientific research on the period, . . . This book is itself a *source*. It is an historic and specifically human source of someone who was at the heart of events and acts of that period.

It is an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of what is still an obscure corner of Holocaust history. Despite the avalanche of material that has appeared in recent years chronicling the destruction of the Jews in Europe, the history of Jewish resistance movements has not received a great deal of attention especially in English, and has remained primarily in the realm of myth and popular culture. There is precious little material on the day to day activities, the cast of characters, the small and large failures, and successes, the exhaustion, the despair, the shock and the horror. It is this texture of their lives that fills Antek's book.

Antek was not interested in a "judicious account," did not strive for some kind of "objectivity," made no attempt to be even, balanced, fair. He was biased and passionate, deeply and personally involved in the events of the period; he was fond of some people, disliked others, admired some and loathed others. He was devoted to his Dror (He-Halutz Ha-Tza'ir) youth movement; but that did not blind him to its deficiencies and failures. He was dedicated to Zionism and profoundly wounded by the silence emanating from leaders of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel. But most often, with a remarkable generosity, he could see both flaws and heroism in the same person. He was *there*, so the myths that have emerged from the Warsaw Ghetto don't impress him: Mordechai Anielewicz, leader of the fighting forces in the Warsaw Uprising, was a boy whose mother sold fish; the historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, who conceived and directed the enterprise of the ghetto archives, gave boring lectures. This hardly denigrates the enormous achievements of these characters, but it does bring them down from the Olympus where they reside in most other accounts and locates them in the realm of humanity.

He also brings the Poles into the sphere of the human. From April 1942 until he left Poland in 1946, Antek served as the top-level liaison between the Jewish and Polish undergrounds, and later between the Jews and the Polish government officials. What emerges in his account is a generous and well-balanced picture of what were very complex relations. He rejects the demonization of the Polish nation as a whole; yet he does not overlook the crimes committed by the Poles against the Jews. In this book, there are extraordinarily brave and devoted Poles who risked their lives to save Jews; and there are Poles who saved Jews to spirit them off to convents and monasteries where they could be spiritually saved by conversion to Catholicism; and sometimes the same Poles did both. There are Poles who died savings Jews, and Poles who made sure more Jews died. There were two Polish undergrounds: the right-wing Armia Krajowa, which was the stronger force during the war; and the Communist Armia Ludowa, which was weak during the war, but strong afterward. Much of the leadership of Armia Krajowa was antisemitic, but many of its members were friendly to the Jews; the situation was more or less reversed in the Armia Ludowa.

When the war was over, some Poles went on murdering Jews, notably in the pogrom in Kielce in the summer of 1946; but it was also the Polish regime that arranged for the rescue and evacuation of Jews from there. What is apparent in Antek's account is the extraordinary complexity of these relations and the treachery of any superficial blanket judgments: they too were human beings.

Like everyone else in the book, and despite all the "I's," Antek also keeps his own dimensions human. This is no pasteboard hero of a shoot-em-up between the Jews and the Nazis, not the swaggering ghetto fighter of popular legend. The Antek presented in this account is more complex and, hence, more courageous: he admits to being frightened almost all the time, humiliated on occasion, on the verge of a breakdown a few times, and often wrong, when mistakes were measured in terms of lives. Like other resistance leaders, his most salient characteristic was his ability to confront the Nazi threat directly without taking refuge in any consolations about the possibility of evading the impending fate of the Jews. Both he and Abba Kovner in Vilna drew the awful conclusion from the massacre of the Vilna Jews in Ponar in the autumn of 1941 that the Nazis meant to liquidate *all* the Jews. Henceforth, all their efforts were devoted to preparing for resistance, knowing full well what the outcome had to be.

The emotional and spiritual toll of living this dangerous paradox was enormous:

> Anyone with eyes in his head understood we were walking a very thin tightrope. The only other choice was to hide, because you could have thought differently: Why endanger yourself? Why be among the wolves when I'm only a dog? Why walk around tense all the time? What good will come from this? You don't know what other people are thinking deep down, and that makes it hard for someone who has to make decisions.

All these resistance fighters were good children of middle-class homes, with no training in weapons or clandestine operations or military tactics. And children they were! Antek, born in 1915, was one of the "old timers" in the group. Most of them were in their late teens and early twenties; they were studying in gymnasia or preparing to immigrate to Palestine when the war caught them and transformed their lives. They had to learn as they went along, under conditions which were hardly conducive to education; and the lessons could be—and most often were—at the cost of their lives. Most of them had been members of one of the various Jewish youth movements which flourished in the inter-war period.[1] Those movements, particularly the Zionist Halutz movements, had aimed at

1. See below.

preparing their members to migrate to Eretz Israel to build workers' settlements there. Now these groups formed the backbone of the resistance organizations in the ghettoes of Eastern Europe. Their members were imbued with a national sense of meaning and destiny, and instilled with a discipline that would stand them in good stead during the Nazi ordeal. In addition, movement membership also served a tactical function during the uprisings when fighting units were composed of members of youth movements who knew one another before the ghetto; hence it was almost impossible to infiltrate spies or agents provocateurs.

Finally, this is a book about heroes and heroism. We have no standards to measure the Warsaw Ghetto and its heroes, for history offers us no parallels. Sometimes, when we want to focus on the helplessness of the Jews, to emphasize their ultimate powerlessness in the face of the Nazi juggernaut, we reduce the event to practically nothing. Historians point out that, in fact, only a handful of German soldiers were actually killed in the Uprising and that, when the Nazis finally got tired of the game, they simply burned down the ghetto and finished it. In the "overall scheme of things," they argue, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising really wasn't very important. At other times, the event is elevated to mythical proportions and those who carried it out are transformed into Titans, demigods.

The truth of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising does not lie "somewhere in between," as the cliché would have it. The truth is in another sphere altogether, at that place where human beings push their human potential beyond anything we've known, out to what looks like the breaking point. And there, they are transformed into heroes; there they expand our definition of human possibility. This is the reality of the Warsaw Ghetto, and what preceded it and what followed it. We didn't have a yardstick to measure that behavior until they came along and provided it.

The people in this book are heroes. Not because they smuggled guns or manufactured Molotov Cocktails or shot Nazi soldiers or defended their positions against tanks and machine guns. But because, in that hell they lived in, they've maintained a human image. Because they stared the reality of their situation directly in the face and took control of their own lives, holding onto their definition of who they were and what they valued—difficult enough in the best of circumstances; well-nigh impossible under Nazi occupation. Risking their lives every single minute, they lived in constant tension and fear, yet they demonstrated a generosity and a capacity for self-sacrifice we seldom find anywhere in history. If the Nazis represent the ultimate evil that human beings are capable of, the cast of this drama demonstrate the ultimate dignity we can also attain.

At the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Antek was interviewed in the Israeli press. The final question he was asked was

what were the military and strategic lessons to be learned from the Ghetto Uprising. He replied:

> I don't think there's any need to analyze the Uprising in military terms. This was a war of less than a thousand people against a mighty army, and no one doubted how it was likely to turn out. This isn't a subject for study in a military school. Not the weapons, not the operations, not the tactics. If there's a school to study the *human spirit,* there it should be a major subject. The really important things were inherent in the force shown by Jewish youths, after years of degredation, to rise up against their destroyers and determine what death they would choose: Treblinka or Uprising. I don't know if there's a standard to measure *that.*