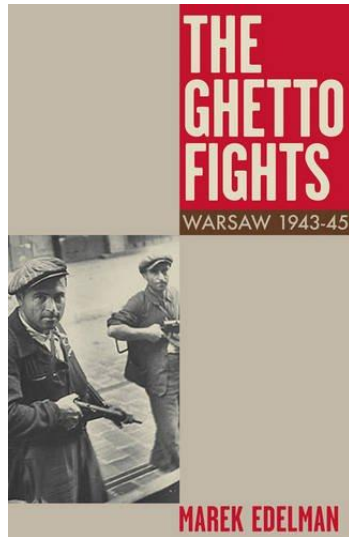


Review: Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights, Warsaw 1943-45*

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Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights, Warsaw 1943-45*
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This 2013 edition by Bookmarks UK is a reissue of the 1990 edition by the same publishers and includes a new introduction by John Rose who also wrote the 1990 introduction.

The book is subtitled Warsaw 1943-45, however the core component of the book is the account by Marek Edelman of the events of the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto. His account begins in 1939 and ends in May 1943 though the introduction deals briefly with events after 1943. This edition also contains two appendices, one of reports from the Jewish workers' underground and the other of correspondence relating to the 1990 edition.

Some of the incidents described by Edelman are truly shocking, or arguably would be truly shocking to readers who had lived without reading any other accounts of the Holocaust or had not seen some of the harrowing depictions in books, newsreels, internet and TV. It might seem that we are now so familiar with these atrocities that their impact is lessened. That being said it must be difficult for any reader to forget easily the images

thrown up by Edelman's account, as in the incident described where three children sitting one behind the other were shot, possibly for sport, possibly to further instill terror, or the description of the burned corpses of mothers with babes in arms. Having on record the first-hand account of someone like Edelman and the fact that he survived the conflict is a rare piece of fortune. After the war he re-focused his attention on the fight against Stalinism and played a part in the Solidarity trade union. He was also an active participant in support for displaced Palestinians and remained true to his anti-Zionist beliefs. This may have had the effect of drawing attention away from his part in the Ghetto Uprising.

One of the questions that frequently comes up when this and similar accounts are considered, as well as the overall plight of the Jews of the period, was why in most cases it took so long before they began to resist - sadly in most cases even when they did decide to resist, it was too late. One simplistic answer to this question could be as recounted by Edelman at one point when he says: 'The Ghetto did not believe'.

During the early days of the Ghetto and indeed to different degrees even later on, many aspects of normal social life continued to exist relatively unaffected by the enforced confinement and growing instances of deportations and physical abuse. Some of the wealthier members of society carried on a relatively privileged existence while their fellow residents died of hunger on the streets. Commerce continued along with black-market dealings for profit. In such an environment it might be that even those people with most access to information (by paying for it) refused to believe that the same fate that was visited on the lower classes could be inflicted on themselves.

After the deportation schedule had been completed there were some 60,000 Jews left

in the city, by Edelman's account. From this time he speaks of how the 'Pinkert Boys' the gravediggers and garbage collectors became wealthy because they were able to smuggle 'valuables' that could no longer be used in the ghetto, to the Aryan side. He also says that every inhabitant of the ghetto dreamed of becoming re-established on the Aryan side. Was this because they now believed at this particular juncture, when the deportations were stopped, that the threat of total annihilation was lessened or removed? Did they believe that the conditions and events that had recently taken place and were affecting Jews inside the ghetto would not have the same effect on Jews who managed to make it out of the ghetto? Or was it just a dream that they really knew could never be fulfilled?

The third section of the book is a report on the uprising published by the Bund (Jewish Socialist Party). Understandably it is a more polished account than that of Edelman's and has a kind of a propaganda feel to it with its relatively liberal use of opinion. This doesn't take away from its value as a compilation of first-hand accounts. Notably, it touches on the fact of the existence of other relevant groups inside the ghetto; something not mentioned in Edelman's account. One group, the Revisionists, the report says: 'formed a small 'Organization for vengeance' of their own which ceased to exist after the second day of battle'. Of course Edelman was a member of the Bund within the ZOB (the Jewish Fighting Organization); however it might have been useful to have some discussion of other groups in the ghetto, possibly as part of Rose's introduction.

In this edition's introduction, Rose wastes no time in addressing the controversy that followed on from his original introduction to the 1990 edition following its publication in Britain. Correspondence relating to that controversy is reproduced in a later section of this edition. This correspondence deals with an argument around the actual level of importance of the Bund as a component of the ZOB as opposed to the role of the Socialist Zionists.

It could be argued that it may be in-

evitable when looking back at times of struggle and momentous conflict that there are nearly always conflicting accounts as to who did what and when and it might be simpler for a reader to dismiss such conflicts as not so important in the overall scheme of things. However it would seem to this reviewer that in this instance it is important to consider this issue because of the assumption, into the Zionist narrative of its own history, the position of this particular struggle and others as well as the powerful sway held by Zionism today in the state of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Every ideology has a tendency to keep reflecting on its own view of history in an effort to reinforce itself. It is worth noting that, in the last installment of the correspondence, Rose's response to Grayek's criticisms (Stefan Grayek, President World Federation of Jewish Fighters, Partisans and Camp Inmates) includes praise for Grayek's heroic role in history and also an acceptance by Rose of the possibility that the Bund had waited too long to join with the Zionists because of the importance they (the Bund) placed on their own alliance with the Polish Socialist Party. Rose goes on to deal with his assessment of the reasons for this delay, mainly, in his opinion, the fatalism of the Zionists. Such fatalism could be seen as a major operational hindrance to organized resistance when deciding to take a stand in a fight against very possible annihilation. John Rose is a widely respected authority on Jewish religion and history and has been a long time critic of Zionism, writing extensively on the subject. That a personage such as Grayek with his own high profile and history as part of the Warsaw uprising should engage in such a debate with Rose could be seen as a recognition of the importance of his Rose's opinions on these subjects.

As noted above the core section of the book is Marek Edelman's own first-hand account of events in the Warsaw Ghetto. Rose's introduction sets the scene. He describes how the conditions in the ghetto came about as part of the Nazi plan of the Final Solution. He then goes further and deals with the in-

fluences on the situation of the historic, geographical tug of war exerted on the territory of Poland by the neighbouring powers, particularly by Germany and Russia who he describes as having 'a long and treacherous history of occupying Poland'. He also discusses the effect on Stalin's actions (or inactions) because of his plans to occupy Poland after the war. In 1944 the advancing Red Army remained camped on the opposite bank of the Vistula from Warsaw while the German counter-attack decimated the Polish insurrection. Cynically, Stalin knew that a weakened Polish resistance would mean less organized resistance to Soviet occupation when it inevitably came. This event took place some time after the Ghetto fights had ended with the almost total annihilation of the Ghetto Resistance fighters and the Jewish population, however it is an important indicator of the plight of the Polish populace and their position between the forces of Hitler and Stalin.

It might be understandable to think that

what the Ghetto fighters did in taking a stand was unavoidably necessary given that the German forces made it clear that their goal was the total annihilation of the residents of the ghetto and that by taking a stand the rebels were likely to be killed in no worse a fashion than if they agreed to be deported. However, some ghetto residents, although admittedly very few, managed to escape by means of a route which had been available since the main deportations began. The fact is that the rebels chose to remain long after it was obvious that they were scheduled for extermination. This would suggest that they believed their struggle could make a difference. Support for their belief may be taken from reports of the encouraging effect of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on Jews in other ghettos and on the Polish Resistance.

That the accounts of those events contained in this book should have an encouraging effect on every reader engaged in struggle against oppression seems undeniable.